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THE SCHOOL ON THE STEAMER.

DOUBLE-
LENGTH
TALE OF
TOM MERRY
AND CO.

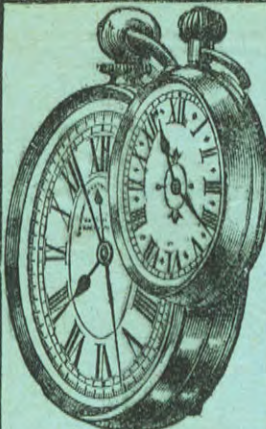
BY
MARTIN
CLIFFORD.



NO. 30.

VOL. 2.

"Under the circs.," said D'Arcy, in his most stately manner, "I decline to move. I may be in the way, or I may not be in the way; but, anyway, I wegard you as a wude beast!"



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THE SCHOOL ON THE STEAMER.

*A Splendid Com-
plete Tale of
Tom Merry & Co.*

By
MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER I. An Indignation Meeting.

"**W**HAT I think is —"
"Exactly."
"In my opinion —"
"Yaas, wathah!"
"I want to point out —"
"Bravo!"

Tom Merry's voice was drowned by a cheer from a score of excited juniors. He gave up the attempt to make himself heard, and waited for a lull.

It was an excited gathering on the boat-deck of the Condor. The great steamer, which had sailed from Southampton with a hundred of the boys of St. Jim's on board, was throbbing on over the blue waters of the North Sea, under a cloudless September sky.

The St. Jim's fellows had welcomed the idea of spending the midsummer vacation at sea on the steamer. They had looked forward to having a good time; and when they had once got

their sea-legs they had had a good time. But this was chiefly due to the fact that Mr. Horace Ratcliff, the senior master, had been, until lately, confined to his cabin. Mr. Ratcliff was a bad sailor, and it had taken him a long time to get used to the salt water.

While he was ill Mr. Railton had taken charge of affairs, and all had gone well. But Mr. Ratcliff had emerged at last, with a green countenance and an acid temper. He had immediately taken the reins of authority into his own hands, with the result that in a few days the "Saints" were in a state of exasperation.

Mr. Ratcliff had been master of the New House at St. Jim's, and he had not been liked there. But under the eye of the Head he had not been able to give his peculiar temperament full play. On board the Condor he was senior master, and monarch of all he surveyed. And as soon as he was able to stand he had proceeded to make his power felt.

And the boys—especially the School House boys—did not like it. As Monty Lowther remarked, the New House chaps

A DOUBLE-LENGTH TALE OF TOM MERRY NEXT THURSDAY

No. 30 (New Series).

were used to Ratty's funny ways. But the School House fellows thought it was not good enough.

Fellows in the Fifth and Sixth grinned and bore it—or bore it without grinning. But the juniors, among whom the sense of discipline was not so strong, murmured; and now some of them were airing their grievances on the boat-deck.

Tom Merry had mounted upon a deck chair. It was a rather insecure rostrum, but he kept his footing by careful balancing. He had not succeeded in saying anything so far; but everyone knew what he was going to say, so they did not wait for him to finish before they cheered.

"Bravo! Good old Merry! Bravo!"

"Yaas, wathah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus of the Fourth Form. "Tom Mewwy has exactly expressed my sentiments in the maffah."

"But I haven't said anything yet!" grinned Tom Merry.

"The fact is—" said Jack Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! The fact is, deah boys—"

"Dry up a minute, Gussy, and let me speak."

"I wufine to dwy up. What I think is—"

"Order!" exclaimed Lowther. "Order for the chair!"

"Order for the deck chair!"

"You see," said Tom Merry, as soon as he could make his voice heard, "it's impossible for us to put up with this sort of thing—"

"Absolutely impos, deah boy."

"Hear, hear!"

"It's all very well for the New House chaps to be nagged and ragged by Ratty—they're used to it—"

"Hear, hear!" roared Manners.

"Hallo, what's that?" exclaimed Figgins of the New House.

"I say it's all very well for you New House chaps to be nagged and ragged by Ratty. He's your housemaster. But—"

"Are you looking for a thick ear, Tom Merry?"

"Don't interrupt. What I say is, Ratty has no right to put on airs towards the School House chaps—"

"Hear, hear!"

"Well, he's senior housemaster," said Figgins. "You can't get out of that."

"Yes; but in my opinion a great deal too much importance is attached to seniority," said Tom Merry. "To say that a senior master is any better than a junior master is the same as saying that a senior form is better than a junior form—that the Fifth is better than the Shell or the Fourth, which is—"

"Rot!" said Monty Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah—feahful wot!"

"In my opinion," went on Tom Merry, warming to his subject, "much more importance should be attached to juniority—"

"To what?" yelled Figgins.

"Juniority."

"What on earth's juniority?"

"I'm not here to attend to the neglected education of a New House fellow," said Tom Merry loftily. "If you don't know what juniority is, you can go and ask your precious housemaster, Figgy. As I was saying, in my opinion more importance ought be attached to juniority than to seniority—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Turn that fellow out. He's interrupting the meeting."

"I'd like to see somebody turn me out," remarked Figgins, in a casual way.

"Well, shut up! Where was I?"

"On the deck-chair."

"Ass! Let me see—oh, more importance ought to be attached to juniority than to seniority. I put it to you, gentlemen of the Shell and the Fourth Form—"

"Hear, hear!"

"Is there such a thing as human progress? Is there an improvement in society from age to age? There is."

"Vewy probably."

"There is!" repeated Tom Merry, with emphasis. "Now what is the cause of this improvement? It is evidently because the younger generation is superior to the older one. If the younger generation is superior to the older one, the older one must be inferior to the younger one—"

"Did you work that out in your head?" asked Kerr.

"Don't interrupt. Now it is absurd for the superior to take orders from the inferior, isn't it?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Therefore promotion ought to go by juniority, not by seniority—"

"Hear, hear!"

"And the junior housemaster ought to be in authority and the senior housemaster ought to go and eat coke," said Tom Merry. And this magnificent peroration was followed by a round of cheers.

Jack Blake began to speak, but for some moments he could not make his voice heard. He seized Tom Merry by the sleeve and tried to jerk him off the chair.

"Hold on!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "I mean let go! What are you up to?"

"Get off that chair."

"Eh?"

"Get off that chair."

"I'm addressing the meeting—"

"Yes, I know you are. And what do you mean by taking the lead in this matter?" demanded Blake. "I'm your junior by two months and seven days, so I'm entitled to be leader on your own showing."

Tom Merry was taken aback for a moment.

"Hear, hear!" exclaimed Digby. "Get off that chair, Merry."

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Of course, there's a limit to everything," he said. "I'm no believer in carrying one's principles to ridiculous extremes."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Besides, as the most sensible fellow present—"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, I cannot allow that statement to pass uncontradicted—"

"The fact is—" said Figgins.

"Order!"

"Rats!"

"Look here," said Tom Merry, "to come to the point once more, we've had enough of Ratty's funny ways."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Figgins can stand up for him if he likes; but he's a rotter."

"Hear, hear!"

"He pecks at Railton, who is a decent sort—"

"Good old Railton!"

"And shuts him up. He assumes all sorts of authority, and has lengthened the time given to lessons."

There was a general groan.

"Strictly speaking, we're entitled to do no lessons at all during the vacation; but the Head arranged it, and we agreed. We weren't asked, as a matter of fact, but we agreed tacitly—"

"Well, that's a good word," said Kerr.

"We agreed tacitly. We don't want to go back on our agreement. The Head had a curious idea that on board ship we should get into mischief if we had nothing to do all day, and the arrangement of the lessons was the result. Of course, the Head was mistaken. We know how to look after ourselves; and he might have left it to us."

"Yes, rather!"

"But he didn't; and we agreed to keep on the lessons—tacitly. But it was understood that afternoon lessons were to be cut short, and holidays frequent. Ratty is lengthening them again, and grunting about the holidays too."

"Rotter!"

"Cad!"

"Brast!"

"Toad!"

These tributes to Mr. Ratcliff, and many more of a similar character, interrupted the speaker for some minutes. They came as heartily from New House as from School House boys. The juniors were at one in the matter. Figgins had remarked that a fellow ought to stand up for his housemaster if he could, but that Ratty was past the limit.

"The question is, are we going to stand it?"

"No!"

"Are we going to resist the tyrant, and pull him down off his giddy perch?"

"Yes."

"Then how?"

Silence.

"Oh, we'll find a way," said Blake, after a pause. "Ratty hasn't any right to worry us. After all, we're on this voyage for our health, and with Ratty grousing about our health is bound to suffer. We shall have to stop him, if only from a sense of duty."

"Yaas, wathah! And I've got a wippin' ideah, deah boys."

"Go and boil it," said Figgins.

"Weally, Figgins—"

"No time for D'Arcy's ideas," said Monty Lowther. "Life's too short. What I say is—"

"Wats! I have a wippin' ideah—"

"Now then, Gussy, ring off—"

"I decline to ring off. I have a wippin' ideah—"

"Out with it!" said Tom Merry. "Cut it short."

"I think that undah the cires the best thing we can do is to take possession of the steamah and turn piwates."

"Turn what?"

"Piwates."

"What on earth are piwates?"

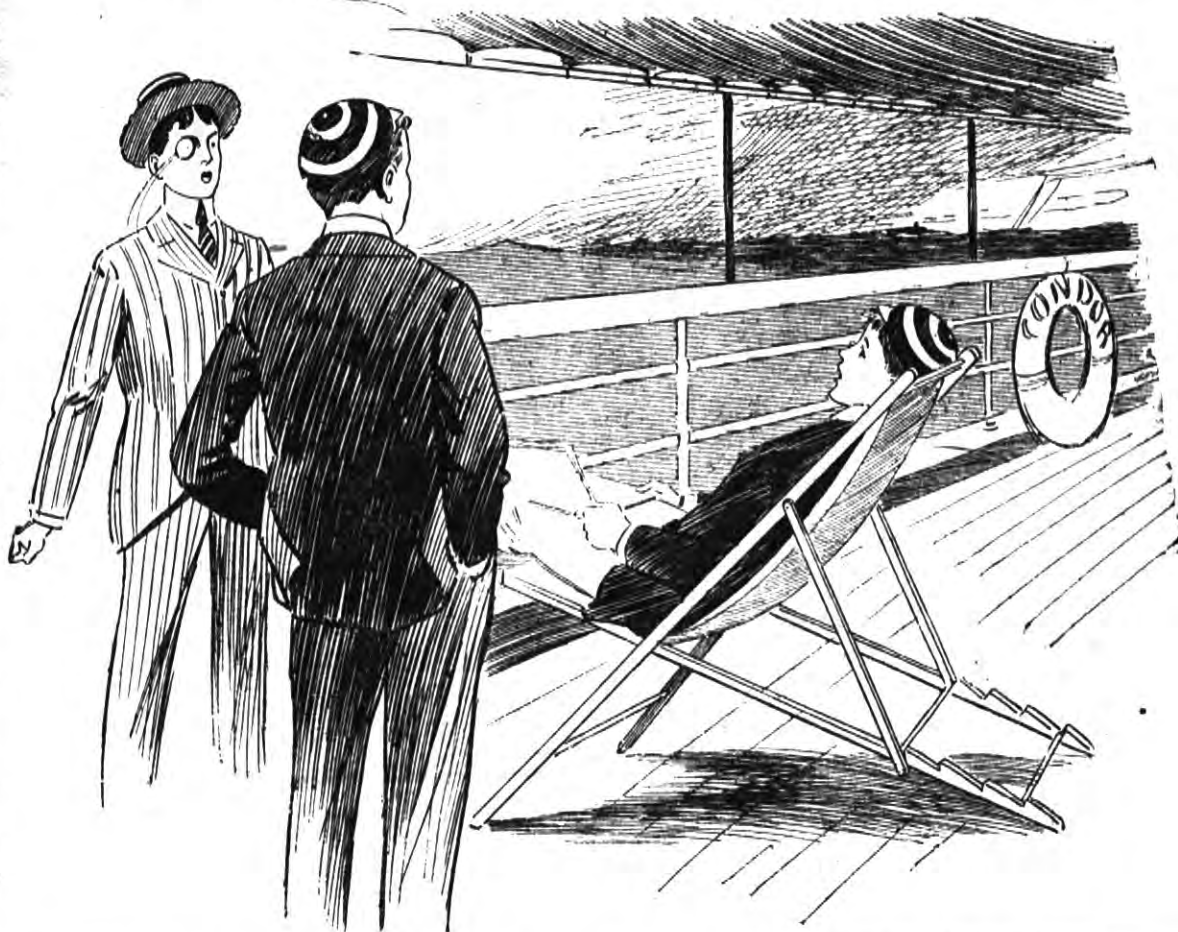
"He means pirates," roared Blake. "Ha, ha, ha! Captain Kidd in a silk hat and an eyeglass! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Blake, it's wathah bad form to cackle at a seewin suggestion."

"Pirates!" said Tom Merry. "Oh, my hat! Ha, ha, ha!"

"I think it's wathah a wippin' ideah to turn piwates. I was weadin' a stowey the othah day of a chap who wan away from school and turned piwate, and he had a weally wippin' time. He had a wakish-lookin' cwaft—"

"A what?"



"I wish a particularly silly ass would not interrupt," said Tom. D'Arcy screwed in his eyeglass, and surveyed the hero of the *Shell* with a look of lofty indignation.

"A wakissh-lookin' cwaft—"

"Oh, a rakish-lookin' craft," said Tom Merry, grinning. "I'm afraid the *Condor* isn't sufficiently rakish-looking for the purpose, Gussy, so we can't turn pirates."

"Weally, it's a wathah wippin' ideah."

"We shall have to think of something a little more ripping, I'm afraid. The question is, how shall we muzzle Ratty? What I say is—"

Tom Merry stopped suddenly.

A tall, thin gentleman had suddenly appeared on the boat deck. His thin, sour face was extremely acid in expression, and his eyes, greenish-grey in hue, had a hard glint in them.

It was Mr. Ratcliff, the senior housemaster.

He came straight towards the excited meeting, and a sudden silence fell upon the juniors.

CHAPTER 2. The Tyrant.

"MERRY!"

Mr. Ratcliff rapped out the word sharply. Tom Merry raised his cap politely.

"Adsum—I mean, yes, sir."

"What is all this noise about?"

"Noise, sir?"

"Yes, noise. You juniors have been making a great deal of noise, shouting and stamping," said Mr. Ratcliff harshly.

"If you please, sir," said Blake, "shouting is a good exercise for the lungs—"

"Yass, wathah; and stampin' is a good exercise for the legs, sir."

"We have to take exercise on deck every day, sir," said Monty Lowther.

Mr. Ratcliff frowned darkly. It was not difficult for him to see the veiled impertinence under the submissive manner of the juniors. He had provoked it himself, but that did not make it any the more pleasant for him.

"Lowther, D'Arcy, Blake, you will take fifty lines each!" he snapped out.

"Yes, sir. What for, sir?" asked Blake.

"For impertinence to your master."

Blake's eyes glinted.

"If you please, sir, you're not our master. Mr. Railton's our master."

"Blake!"

"Yes, sir."

"You cannot be unaware that as senior housemaster I am in authority over boys of both Houses," said Mr. Ratcliff. "I regard your reply as deliberate insolence."

"Yes, sir," said Blake.

There was a faint giggle, and Mr. Ratcliff bit his lip.

"I shall be compelled to make an example of you, Blake. I intend to maintain order here. Merry, get off that chair."

"Off this chair, sir?" said Tom Merry.

"Yes," exclaimed Mr. Ratcliff angrily—"and at once."

"I'm not doing any harm here, sir."

"Will you obey me or not?"

"You are not my housemaster, sir."

Mr. Ratcliff breathed hard through his nose. It was no time for words, and he made a step towards Tom Merry to drag him off the chair. Tom Merry made a sudden movement, and lost his footing on the insecure rostrum, and fell—right into the arms of Mr. Ratcliff!

The senior housemaster gave a gasp as the junior plumped upon his chest, sending him flying backwards.

He went with a bump on the deck, and Tom Merry rolled off his chest and jumped up, leaving him gasping like a landed fish.

"My hat!" murmured Blake. "There'll be a row now!"

He was right.

Mr. Ratcliff slowly sat up, his face convulsed with anger. He maintained a sitting posture for a minute, while he recovered his breath, and then with slow deliberateness rose to his feet.

"Merry!"

"Yes, sir."

"Follow me below."

Mr. Ratcliff walked away, fully expecting the junior to follow. Tom Merry did not stir from the spot.

"I say, better go," murmured Figgins.

The hero of the Shell shook his head.

"It will be serious!"

"I don't care," said Tom Merry. "That was an accident, and it wouldn't have happened if he hadn't interfered with us. What right had he to interfere?"

"None; but—"

"He's not my housemaster. The Head said distinctly that each House would be under its own master here, the same as at St. Jim's."

"Yes, but—"

"Ratcliff is taking a mean advantage," said Tom Merry with a flash in his eyes. "I'm not going to be caned by him."

Mr. Ratcliff turned round as he reached the stairs, and saw that Tom Merry was not following him. His brow became like a thundercloud.

"Merry!" he called out.

"Yes, sir."

"Come here instantly."

Tom Merry hesitated for a moment, and then crossed to where the housemaster stood. The other juniors followed him in silence, anxious as to what would happen. Several of the ship's hands were looking on with curious glances, and Captain Bolsover, on the bridge, was looking down upon the scene.

"I ordered you to follow me, Merry."

"Yes, sir."

"You disobeyed me, sir."

Tom Merry was silent.

"I am going to cane you for your insolence," said Mr. Ratcliff.

"I shall give you six extra strokes for disobedience."

Tom Merry's lips came tightly together.

"Now follow me below to my cabin."

Mr. Ratcliff descended the stairs amidstships. Tom Merry made no motion to follow.

"Bravo!" murmured Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Buck up, deah boy!"

Mr. Ratcliff looked up the stairs. There was a red spot in either cheek now. He realised that he was beginning to look ridiculous.

"Merry!"

"Yes, sir."

"Follow me."

"You are not my housemaster, sir."

"Do you refuse to obey me?"

Tom Merry drew a long breath.

"Yes, sir."

The die was cast now.

There was a murmur among the juniors—a murmur of anxiety and uneasiness. What would follow they had no idea, but it was certain that Mr. Ratcliff could not give way without losing his last vestige of authority on board the Condor.

Mr. Ratcliff appeared to be perplexed himself. He had provoked resistance, but he had not a strong nature, and did not know how to deal with it when provoked.

"Merry," he said at length, "your punishment will be more severe if you do not obey me instantly."

"I will obey my own housemaster's orders," said Tom Merry.

"What is this?"

It was a deep and pleasant voice, as Mr. Railton came along the passage below. The sound of the New House master's voice had reached him in his cabin, where he had been at work. Mr. Ratcliff looked round.

The coming of Mr. Railton relieved him to some extent of his difficulty.

"I am dealing with a case of insubordination," he said.

"Indeed," said Mr. Railton, looking worried. "What is the matter?"

"Tom Merry refuses to obey my orders, and seems to think that he will have your support in doing so—"

"I did not say anything of the sort," broke out Tom Merry.

"I said that I would obey my own housemaster."

"Come down here, Merry," said Mr. Railton quietly.

"Yes, sir."

"You must understand," said Mr. Railton, "that Mr. Ratcliff is senior master here, and that the doctor gave him authority over both Houses."

Tom Merry bit his lip.

"The Head said, before we left St. Jim's, sir, that each house would remain under its own master."

"Yes, certainly; but in matters of general discipline the senior master takes full authority," said Mr. Railton, speaking with an effort. The assumption of authority over his boys by the other housemaster was as galling to him as it could be to them, but he was not in a position to resist it. "You must understand that, Merry, and all you other boys must understand it, too."

The juniors were grimly silent.

"You must obey Mr. Ratcliff on all occasions," said the School House master. "I—I order you to do so."

"That alters the case, sir. I will obey Mr. Ratcliff if you tell me to."

"Well, I do tell you to do so."

"Very well, sir."

And Tom Merry followed the New House master to his cabin. His face was a little pale, his lips firmly set. He realised the difficult position of his own housemaster, and did not wish to make it more difficult. But it went very much against the grain to give in to Mr. Ratcliff.

Mr. Ratcliff's cabin was a double one, one apartment being furnished and used as a study. It was this room he entered now, Tom Merry following him in. The New House master selected a cane from his desk.

"Hold out your hand, Merry."

For a single instant the hero of the Shell hesitated, and then he held out his hand. He had made up his mind to go through with it, and it was of no use hanging back now. He held out his hand.

Mr. Ratcliff measured the distance with his eye, very carefully, and made the cane sing through the air as he brought it down.

It was a terrible stroke, and it made Tom Merry wince with pain. But he set his lips hard together, and no sound passed them.

"The other hand," said Mr. Ratcliff harshly.

The second stroke was as savage as the first. Then followed five more on each hand, till it seemed to Tom Merry that his skin was being torn by red-hot irons, and every nerve in his body was thrilling with the pain.

Yet his teeth remained tight, his lips silent.

There was a baffled expression upon Mr. Ratcliff's face as he threw down the cane. He had inflicted a savage punishment, but the scorn in the boy's eyes still stung him.

"You may go," he said harshly.

Tom Merry quitted the cabin without a word.

CHAPTER 3.

Tom Merry is Excused.

THE electric bell buzzed for afternoon school a few minutes after Tom Merry quitted the housemaster's cabin. Tom Merry made his way forward to the room which had been the third-class dining-saloon when the Condor was a passenger ship, and which was now used as the Shell class-room.

"Tom!"

Manners and Lowther met him. Tom Merry gave them a nod and a faint smile, though his lips were trembling.

"Let me look at your hands?" said Lowther.

"It's nothing!"

"Let me look!"

The chums of the Shell gave a simultaneous growl of anger as they saw the red and swollen flesh. Mr. Ratcliff had struck very hard. He would never have ventured to use the cane so at home at St. Jim's, where he was responsible to the Head. But here there was no one above Mr. Ratcliff, he was answerable to himself alone. As with most weak natures, the possession of power brought out his worst qualities, and made him a tyrant.

"The beast!" said Manners.

"The cad!" said Lowther.

"Oh, it's all right," said Tom Merry. "The bell's gone; let's get on to the class-room."

"Have we got to put up with this?" said Lowther, between his teeth. "Isn't there anything that can be done?"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Railton ought to make a stand against the cad," said Manners hotly.

"How can he, when the Head placed him under Ratty's orders?"

"Well, something ought to be done."

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"I was thinking of a revolt," said Tom Merry restlessly. "But that would place Railton in a difficulty; and besides, it wouldn't help the New House chaps. They would be under Ratty still, and he would make them suffer for it. He's pretty nearly as rough on Figgins & Co. as on us."

"That's true."

"We shall have to think it out, that's all. Let's get along to class now."

The Terrible Three entered the Shell class-room. The Form were in their places, and Mr. Linton, the master, frowned a little as the chums came in. Then he started as he caught sight of the face of Tom Merry.

"What is the matter, Merry?"

"Nothing, sir," said Tom.

"You are looking very white."

"I—I'm all right, sir."

But, even as Tom spoke bravely a twitch of pain passed over his face. Mr. Linton was a severe master, but a conscientious one. He came towards Tom Merry with a look of concern on his face.

"If you are not well, Merry, you can be excused lessons," he said. "You certainly look very strange. Is it sea-sickness again?"

"No, sir," said Tom Merry, with a faint smile.

Mr. Linton glanced at his hands, which Tom was unconsciously twisting in the pain that racked them.

"What is the matter with your hands, Merry?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Show them to me?"

Tom Merry held out his hands. The Form-master's brow grew very dark as he looked at them. The traces of a savage castigation was very plain.

"Who has done this, Merry?"

"It is all right, sir."

"It is impossible that Mr. Railton would cane you like this?"

"He did not, sir."

"Now, Merry, I can see that you wish to shield the brutal person who has used you like this," said Mr. Linton. "But I must insist upon you telling me. You have been used in a brutal and outrageous way."

Tom Merry turned crimson.

He could see that Mr. Linton believed that he had been ill-used by some bullying senior, and he wanted the bully's name to punish him. When he learned that the bully was Mr. Ratcliff, the senior master on board, the situation would be rather awkward, after the expressions he had used in the presence of all the Shell.

"Come, Merry, answer my questions."

"I have been caned, sir."

"I can see that, Merry. But by whom?"

"By Mr. Ratcliff, sir."

Mr. Linton started, and coloured.

"—I did not think of that," he said, "I—but you are not in a state for lessons, Merry. You are excused for the afternoon. You may go on deck."

"Thank you, sir."

Tom Merry quitted the class-room. He was glad to be relieved of the afternoon's work. He was upset and aching from the caning, and in no condition for any kind of study.

He went on deck. He caught a glimpse of Mr. Ratcliff's thin figure going towards the second-class smoke-room, aft, now used as a class-room for the Fifth Form. Mr. Ratcliff was Form-master of the Fifth. Tom Merry was careful to avoid the New House master, and he went up to the boat-deck and sat down in a chair in the shadow of a boat.

The Condor was deserted above decks save by the seamen and the officers on the bridge. The steamer was moving at an easy rate through a sunny sea, and there was scarcely a cloud in the sky. The sea rippled and gleamed round the great ship, and a summer breeze blew across the wide waters. All Nature smiled that glorious day, but Tom Merry's face was dark.

The voyage had begun happily enough, but now it bade fair to terminate in general discomfort, owing to Mr. Ratcliff's love of interference and domineering.

At St. Jim's the man's unpleasant temper, though kept in control by awe of the Head, had often made things intolerable in his own House. Now he had full control over both Houses. And there was no doubt that the sense of power had got into his head, so to speak, and the worst had not come yet.

His old rivalry with Mr. Railton, his old bitter dislike of Tom Merry & Co. would be gratified now to the full. If matters went from bad to worse the situation would grow intolerable, and what would happen then?

"In trouble, youngster?"

Tom Merry started from a gloomy reverie and looked up. The kindly face of Mr. Green, the second mate of the Condor, was looking down upon him. The second mate was on the best of terms with the boys of St. Jim's, and Tom Merry gave him a friendly nod.

"It's all right," he said.

Mr. Green laughed his jovial laugh.

"You don't look as if it were all right. Ay, ay, I saw that little row awhile back. Longlegs is rather a coughdrop, ain't he?"

Tom Merry laughed. He knew whom Mr. Green meant by the irreverent appellation of Longlegs.

"Yes, he is rather a rotter," he agreed.

"And you have been catching it?"

"Yes."

"Discipline must be maintained," said Mr. Green, with a solemn shake of the head—"discipline must be maintained. But I daresay Longlegs— Good-afternoon, sir!" And Mr. Green turned with a bland smile towards Mr. Ratcliff, who was coming across the deck.

The New House master looked at him rather sourly, and then turned to Tom Merry. Mr. Green gave a slight shrug of his broad shoulders, and then walked on. Mr. Ratcliff fixed his eyes upon Tom Merry.

"What are you doing here, Merry?"

"Sitting down, sir."

The housemaster's sallow cheek went pink. He had left his Form under the charge of the German master for twenty minutes, and had come up to take a turn on the boat-deck and to his amazement had found Tom Merry there. His brow was very dark.

"Don't be impertinent, Merry. How comes it that you are here instead of being with the Shell at lessons?"

"Mr. Linton has excused me for the afternoon, sir."

The house-master looked baffled for a moment. Tom Merry's excuse was so valid that he could not possibly find fault with him.

"Why did Mr. Linton excuse you, Merry?"

"He thought I was not in a condition to work, sir."

"Because you had been caned?"

"Yes."

Mr. Ratcliff scribbled on a page of his pocket-book, tore it out, and folded it, and handed it to Tom Merry.

"Take that to your Form-master at once, Merry."

"Very well, sir."

Tom Merry went down to the Shell class-room with the note. Mr. Linton looked surprised to see him, and still more surprised when he read the epistle. It ran as follows:

"Dear Mr. Linton,—I do not wish Merry to be excused any of his work.—Yours, etc., HORACE RATCLIFF."

Mr. Linton read that note through twice, with a heightened colour. Then he took up his pencil and wrote on the back of it, refolded it, and handed it to Tom Merry.

"Take that to Mr. Ratcliff, Merry," he said.

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry, wondering what was in the note.

He found Mr. Ratcliff walking up and down the deck, with his thin hands clasped behind him. Mr. Ratcliff looked at him sharply.

"What have you come here for again, Merry?"

"Mr. Linton has sent you this note, sir."

"Give it me."

Mr. Ratcliff opened the note, and his face went almost green as he read the following polite communication:

"Dear Mr. Ratcliff,—During school hours I should not allow even the Head, if he were here, to interfere between my pupils and myself. Merry is excused for the afternoon.—Yours, etc., J. LINTON."

Mr. Ratcliff read the note, and then looked at Tom Merry. He felt baffled. He had overstepped the limit in this direction at least, and had been brought up very sharply.

He screwed the note tightly in his hand, and tossed it over the rail into the sea. Then he turned on his heel, without another glance or word to Tom Merry.

CHAPTER 4.

Fatty Wynn is Disappointed!

"TOM MEWWY!"

Tom Merry looked up. He was reclining in a deck-chair, reading a "Magnet," a fortnight old, when the swell of St. Jim's tapped him on the shoulder.

"If you are not particularly interested in your weadin', Tom Mewwy, I should like to speak to you."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I am," said Tom Merry. "Couldn't you go and speak to Figgins?"

"Weally—"

"Never mind," said Tom Merry, laughing, and laying his book down on his knee. "What is it, Gussy? I can see by your expression that it's a matter of the most awful and fearful importance."

"Yaas, wathah! It's about that wottah Watcliff."

"Go on."

"It's absolutely impossible for us to stand him, and I have thought of a wathah bwilliant ideah for pullin' him off his perch."

"You want to turn pirate again, I suppose?"

"Nothin' of the sort. It is a bwilliant ideah, and it flashed into my bwain all of a sudden."

"Well, what is it?"

"That is what I am goin' to explain at a genewal meetin'," said D'Arcy. "I am callin' a meetin' of the Lower Forms for the purpose. All the Fourth Form and the Shell are requested to be in the Fourth Form class-woom—othahwise known as the second-class dining-saloon—at five o'clock pweecisely."

"What for?"

"For me to explain the bwiliant ideah that flashed into my bwain."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Is anybody coming?"

"Yaas, wathah! Both Forms."

"I mean, have they promised to come?"

"I pwesume there is no doubt about their turnin' up on an occasion like this," said D'Arcy, with dignity. "The posiah is gwowin' intolewable. I shall jolly soon bwing the wottah down off his perch, Tom Mewwy, if I am pwopahly backed up by the juniahs. I twust, by the way, that the pain of that feahful lickin' has subsided?"

"Yes, rather," said Tom Merry. "It's all right now. I'll come to the meeting."

"Good! Of course, you will wemembah that it is I who am callin' the meetin', and you will not start makin' any speeches."

"Right-ho!" laughed Tom Merry. "You shall do all the speechifyin', Gussy, and you can keep it up as long as the fellows can stand it."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"But you will be responsible for all casualties. That's understood."

"Pway don't wot, deah boy. I—"

"This is a jolly good story," said Tom Merry, opening his "Magnet" again.

"Is it weally?"

"Yes, and I should enjoy it much more if silly asses wouldn't come along talking to me."

Tom Merry buried his face in his book before Arthur Augustus could reply. D'Arcy screwed in his eyeglass, and surveyed the hero of the Shell for a moment, and then strolled along the deck. He was not quite sure whether Tom Merry meant anything or not by his last remark. But there was no time to go into the matter now. He had to let it be known that a meeting of the juniors was being called.

Fatty Wynn was leaning on the rail gazing at the sea, with a meditative look on his face. D'Arcy tapped him on the shoulder, and Wynn looked round.

"Will you be in the Fourth Form class-woom at five o'clock pweecisely, deah boy?" said D'Arcy.

Fatty Wynn's eyes glistened.

"Yes, rather! I was just thinking that that would be a ripping idea."

"Were you, weally?"

"Yes. We haven't much for tea, you know, and I get so hungry this September weather. What is there to eat?"

"To eat!"

"Yes. I suppose you're not standing a feed without something to eat, are you?"

"Who's talking about a feed?"

"You are, aren't you? What the dickens are we to meet in the Fourth Form room for if there isn't a feed on?" exclaimed Fatty Wynn indignantly.

"It's not a feed; it's a meetin'."

"Oh!" said Fatty Wynn, and he turned away and gazed at the sea again.

"I say, Wynn, it's a wathah important meetin', and you had better come," said D'Arcy. "Tom Mewwy is coming."

"Is he? Will there be any refreshments?"

"I don't see—"

"You can't expect fellows to fag along to the Form-room unless refreshments are provided. It's asking too much."

"It's a most important occasion."

"Yes, but will there be—"

"We are goin' to deal with the tywant."

"The what?"

"The tywant. We are goin' to pull him off his perch."

"Good! But will there be any refreshments?"

"Pewwaps I might manage to pwovide some light weweshments."

"If that's a go I'll come."

"Suppose we say lemonade and buns," said D'Arcy, who was beginning to think that his meeting would hardly be a success if only Tom Merry attended it.

"Well, you might put in some cake, too."

"Vowey well."

"Lemonade, buns, and cake?" said Fatty Wynn, with a business-like air.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Good! I'll come."

"Vowey well. The meetin' is fixed for five pweecisely."

"I'll tell you what I'll do, D'Arcy, to help you make it a success. If you like to give me the tin, I'll do the shopping for

you. I'm a pretty good customer at the buffet, and I can get good terms for quantities."

"But we shan't want vewy gweat quantities," said D'Arcy, realising that if he placed himself in the hands of the obliging Fatty the meeting would soon change its character and become a feed instead.

"Won't you?" said the New House junior. "You say this is a general meeting to take in the whole of the Lower Forms."

"The whole of the Fourth and the Shell. We don't want the Third Form youngstahs. They are not old enough to undertake the responsibility of buckin' up against the Wateliff wottah."

"Well, the Fourth and the Shell will make over forty. Say a bottle of lemonade and a bun each—needn't provide the cake for the lot, you know. Get a cake for me, and I'll explain that there isn't enough to go round."

"Yaas, but—"

"Oh, if you'd rather serve it round, I'll calculate how much you will want."

"But I wouldn't wathah—"

"Very well, then. Say a six-pound cake; that will be enough for me, and a slice or two over for Figgins and Kerr. Now, forty bottles of lemonade, or say fifty, as the cake is certain to make me thirsty—"

"Weally—"

"Fifty bottles of lemonade. But it's no good being mean about it, Gussy. In for a penny, in for a pound, you know. Say sixty bottles, and then every fellow can be sure of having a swig. Sixty bottles of lemonade at twopence each will be one hundred and twenty pence, that's ten shillings—"

"Bui Jove!"

"Forty buns—or say fifty—or perhaps it would be better to have exactly as many buns as bottles of lemonade. What do you think?"

"I weally think—"

"Very well; sixty buns, then. Sixty buns at a penny each is five bob. That runs you into fifteen bob for the meeting, and jolly cheap, too, considering. Then there will be the cake and some jam tarts for me—"

"Jam tarts!"

"Not unless you wish, of course; but I don't see how I can attend a meeting, and make all the arrangements, without having a bit of a feed in compensation. A cake and a dozen jam tarts, and a few cream puffs—say five bob for my little lot, and you'll do the whole thing on the even pound."

D'Arcy screwed his monocle into his right eye and stared at Fatty Wynn.

He was somewhat careless with money himself, but not quite so careless with it as Fatty Wynn appeared to be—with another fellow's cash.

"Weally, Wynn—"

"Now, that's the lot," said Fatty Wynn. "Five bob for a snack for me, five bob for the buns, and ten bob for the lemonade—sixty bottles. Perhaps it would be better to have some ginger-beer for the sake of variety. Instead of sixty lemonades, we'll have forty each of lemonade and ginger-beer."

"But—"

"That will come to a little more, but it will please the fellows. Now that's settled, and if you hand over the cash, I'll see to it in a jiffy."

"Weally, deah boy—"

"I shall get a discount from Mrs. Price for the quantity, you know, and I'll expend that in pies. I'm very fond of pies, and, on second thoughts, I ought to have something more substantial before I start eating tarts and buns and drinking ginger-beer. Don't you think so?"

"Pewwaps so, but—"

"I can do the lot on twenty-two bob," said Fatty Wynn, "and, considering the meeting you'll get, it's cheap at the price."

"Vowey pwob, but—"

"Hand over the cash. If you made it an even twenty-five, I could work in tarts all round. You've only to say the word, and it's tarts all round."

"Yaas, but—"

"May as well see to it at once. I'll guarantee that the tarts are fresh. Mrs. Price knows better than to try to take me in with stale tarts, or buns either. Shall I go at once?"

"Yaas, if you like."

"No good going without the cash."

Arthur Augustus felt in his pocket, and sorted out three pennies, which he placed in the palm of the amazed Fatty Wynn.

Fatty stared at them.

"What's that?" he gasped.

"Thwepence, deah boy."

"Thwepence!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"What's it for?"

"The weweshments."



Fatty Wynn looked at D'Arcy, and looked at the threepence. Then he looked at the School House swell again. "This—only this—for the refreshments?"

"The—the refreshments!"

"Yaas! One bottle of lemonade, and one bun. That is enough for you, deah boy, and the othahs won't want anythin'."

Fatty Wynn looked at D'Arcy, and looked at the threepence. Then he looked at the School House swell again. He was greatly inclined to hurl the threepence into the sea, and Arthur Augustus down the hatchway. But he reflected that if the feast he had sketched out was not to come off, one bottle of lemonade and one bun would be better than nothing.

Before he could quite decide what to say, D'Arcy had strolled on, leaving Fatty with his hand still outstretched, the three pennies in the palm. The fat junior pulled himself together, and slowly made his way to the tuckshop on the upper deck amidships.

CHAPTER 5.

D'Arcy Spoils the Photograph.

"MANNAHS!"

"Get out of the way!"

"Mannahs, deah boy—"

"Stand aside!"

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"You shrieking idiot!" yelled Manners, who was adjusting his camera on a stand on the promenade deck. "Can't you see you're in the way?"

"I may be in the way, or I may not be in the way," said D'Arcy, in his most stately manner. "But that doesn't excuse this beastly wudeness."

"Will you move?"

"Undah the cires I decline to move. I wegard you as a wude beast."

"You're standing just in front of my camera," said Manners, with measured accents. "I'm trying to take that smack over there while I've got a chance. Will you get out of the way, or shall I come round and massacre you."

"I should uttally wefuse to be massacwed," said the swell of the School House frigidly. "It seems to me to be wathah

widiculous for you to be playin' such twicks as poppin' your head undah a cloth—"

"You screaming ass—"

"I wefuse to be alluded to as a scweamin' ass! I considah—"

"Kill him, somebody," said the unhappy Manners. "I've just got the focus, and the villain is standing in the light."

Monty Lowther lifted himself off a deck chair, with the air of one who was making a great effort for the sake of friendship, and seized Arthur Augustus by the collar, and jerked him aside.

"Lowthah, you wottah, welease me at once!" spluttered the swell of St. Jim's. "Do you hear me, you wascally wude wottah! I insist upon bein' immediately weleased. You are wumplin' my collah."

"I'll rumple your neck if you don't keep quiet," said Lowther. Manners had disappeared under the black cloth again. The Condor was gliding smoothly along over a sunny sea, and the smack astern was in an excellent position for a snap. But Arthur Augustus was not so easily disposed of. His dignity was at stake. He gave a mighty wrench and tore himself away, leaving his collar in the grip of Monty Lowther. He loomed up again just in front of the camera as Manners snapped, bursting with indignation.

"Lowthah, I considah you a wude beast. I considah Mannahs a wude beast. I considah Goah a wude, cacklin' beast. I considah—"

The rest of Arthur Augustus's considerations remained forever unknown, for Manners came out from under the black cloth and charged at him like a Spanish bull at a matador.

D'Arcy was bowled over, and he went rolling along the deck, with the indignant photographer sprawling over him.

"Go it!" shouted Lowther. "Sock it to him."

"Mannahs, if you do rot immediately get off my beastly chest I shall give you a feaful thwashin!"

"Cave!" muttered Gore.

Mr. Linton and Mr. Lathom were coming towards the scene

from different quarters. They arrived on the spot at the same time.

"Manners!" rapped out the master of the Shell.

"D'Arcy!" said little Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth.

"D'Arcy! Get up immediately!"

"How can I get up when this heavy wottah is sittin' on my chest?"

"Dear me!" said Mr. Lathom, peeping through his spectacles. "That is very true. Manners, please—er—get off D'Arcy's chest immediately."

"Certainly, sir," said Manners.

He rose to his feet, and Arthur Augustus sat up. He felt for his eyeglass and rammed it into his eye. He felt for his collar to put it straight, but his collar was gone.

"Mannahs! Lowthah! I wegard you as a pair of wuff snats!"

"What is this nonsense about?" said Mr. Linton. "Don't let it occur again, Manners."

"Yes, er—certainly," said little Mr. Lathom. "Don't—er—let it occur again, D'Arcy."

The matter would have ended there, but the noise had attracted the attention of Mr. Ratcliff. He came up just as Mr. Linton finished speaking.

"Another disgraceful scene of hooliganism!" he said, frowning darkly. "The ship would be turned into a pandemonium soon if this is not put down."

"If you please, sir," said D'Arcy. "I wathah object to bein' chawacturised as a hooligan."

"Silence, D'Arcy!"

"Certainly, sir; but I stwongly object."

"Have you punished D'Arcy, Mr. Lathom?"

"Er—no," said Mr. Lathom, blinking. "I have not—er—punished D'Arcy, as I think a little—er—horse-play does not require—er—"

"I am sorry to differ from you. You will take fifty lines, D'Arcy."

"Weally, Mr. Watchiff—"

"Silence! Have you punished Manners, Mr. Linton?"

The master of the Shell frowned. He was not so meek and mild as little Mr. Lathom, and he did not like Mr. Ratcliff's tone. At the same time, it was impossible to dispute the authority of the senior master.

"No!" he said shortly. "I have reprimanded Manners, and I consider that is quite sufficient to meet the case."

"I have to dissent from your opinion. My opinion is that these disgraceful scenes of horse-play and hooliganism cannot be put down too strictly. The repose of St. James's Collegiate School was frequently disturbed by these absurd House disputes, but I intend a new regime to obtain on board the Condor, while I am in charge. Manners, you will take fifty lines."

Manners' eyes gleamed.

"I will take lines from my housemaster, or my Form master sir," he said.

"Manners!"

"You are neither, and you have no right to give me lines," said Manners.

"Another word, Manners, and I will give you a flogging instead of lines," said Mr. Ratcliff, his lips trembling with anger. "Mr. Linton, I expect you to keep the boys of your Form in a better state of discipline."

Mr. Linton flushed.

"The discipline of my Form was never questioned by Dr. Holmes," he said. "My boys have never been impertinent to a master whom they respect."

It was Mr. Ratcliff's turn to flush, and his sallow face went crimson. Mr. Linton was very angry, or he would not have spoken so pointedly. The senior master was at a loss for a moment.

"I shall expect those lines from Manners," he said at length. "If they are not forthcoming, I shall conclude that he is supported in his insolence by one whose duty it is to curb it."

And he walked away.

The juniors felt inclined to cheer Mr. Linton, but the master of the Shell was not the kind of master to cheer. His face was red and annoyed. He spoke snappishly to Manners.

"Manners, you will do the lines as Mr. Ratcliff has directed you."

"Yes, sir," said Manners submissively.

"And you will always obey Mr. Ratcliff's orders."

"I will if you tell me to, sir."

"Well, I do tell you to," said Mr. Linton, his face relaxing a little. "I quite understand your feelings in the matter; but it is the duty of both boys and men to submit to constituted authority, even when it is most galling."

"Very well, sir."

And Mr. Linton and Mr. Lathom walked away together, talking in low tones. Arthur Augustus slowly smoothed his ruffled hair.

"It's rough on Linton," said Lowther. "It's rough on all of us. Why couldn't Ratty keep sick all the time? Obstinate brute."

"I say, Lowthah—"

"My photograph's ruined," grunted Manners, "and the smack's only a speck now. I'd give twopence to anybody who'd throw Gussy overboard."

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"Oh, scat!"

"I wefuse to scat, whatever you mean by that widiculous expression. Lowthah, will you have the kindness to weturn me my collah, or shall I give you a fearful thwashin'?"

"I think you'd better give me the fearful thwashin'," said Lowther. "I've dropped your collar over the rail."

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"The buttonhole had burst, and it was torn, so it wouldn't have been much use to you," said Lowther comfortingly.

"I weward you as a wottah."

"Go bon!" said Monty Lowther, reseating himself in the deck chair, and stretching out his long legs. "You surprise me."

"I should thwash you both," said D'Arcy. "But the weathah is too hot; and, besides, I have othah fish to fry at the present moment. I am callin' a most important meetin' in the Fourth-Form room at five o'clock, and I want all the Shell to come."

"What's the wheeze?"

"I have a brilliant ideah for pullin' that wottah Watchiff down off his giddy perch, you know. It flashed into my brain all of a sudden."

"Will you want to talk?"

"Of course, I shall address the meetin'."

"Then you can count me out," said Lowther. "Life's too short to waste any of it listening to your speechifying."

"I weward that wemark as wude."

"Go and get a clean collar."

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort. Are you wottahs comin' to the meetin'? Tom Mewwy is comin', and Fatty Wynn."

"Oh, if Tom's coming we may amble in!" said Lowther. "Couldn't you manage to get your speech over before the meeting starts? That would be much more comfy for all concerned."

Arthur Augustus did not deign to reply to this impertinent question. He went below in search of a clean collar, and then resumed his canvassing for the mass meeting in the Fourth-Form class-room.

CHAPTER 6.

More Meetings!

AS Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came out of his cabin, arrayed in a clean collar of absolutely spotless whiteness, he almost ran into Figgins. Figgins, the long-legged chief of the New House juniors, stopped at once.

"Hallo, Gussy! Are you coming to the meeting?"

D'Arcy stared at him.

"What meeting, Figgins?"

"I'm calling a meeting to discuss the situation, and to talk over a plan I've formed for pulling the Ratcliff rotter down off his perch," explained Figgins. "I want the whole of the Fourth Form and the Shell to come."

"I am afraid it will be impos—"

"Oh, you'd better come. Everybody will be there."

"I am afraid it will be impos, as I am myself callin' a meetin' at the same time," said Arthur Augustus, surveying Figgins suspiciously through his eyeglass. "It looks to me as if you are twyin' to bone my ideah."

"Your idea! Why, it's my idea."

"Nothin' of the sort. I have been collectin' fellows for the meetin' for the last half-hour," said D'Arcy, indignantly. "I wathah considah—"

"Look here, Gussy—"

"Tom Mewwy and Fatty Wynn and Mannahs and Lowthah are coming to my meeting."

"Kerr and Pratt and French and Kerruish are coming to mine."

"You had better give up the ideah of holdin' a meetin', Figgins, and come to mine instead. I am goin' to explain—"

"Rats!"

"If you say wats to me, Figgins—"

"You can go and eat coke. I'm holding a meeting in the Form-room, and all other meetings are cheap imitations, and not genuine," said Figgins.

"I'm holdin' my meetin' at five o'clock!"

"Curious! I'm holding mine at five."

"In the Form-room?"

"In the Form-room."

"You will have to give way, Figgins, as I had the ideah first. Besides, I have a wappin' plan to bring the Watchiff wottah down off his beastly perch, you know."

"What is it?"

"I shall explain that to the general meetin'."

"You can go and explain it to the fishes in the North Sea," said Figgins. "I've got a plan to explain to the meeting."

"I shall wefuse——"

"Oh, scat!"

And Figgins walked away. Arthur Augustus glared after him through his eyeglass, and then went on heating up recruits for his meeting. Figgins was doing the same.

It was unfortunate that both had fixed upon the same time and place for the meeting, but the coincidence was easily explained. They wanted the meeting to take place before tea, which was at six. And the Form-room was the only available place where they felt that they would be safe from the lynx eyes of Mr. Ratcliff.

Figgins strolled into the tuckshop, or the buffet as it was called, amidships on the upper deck—the next above the main-deck. Fatty Wynn was there, and half a dozen other juniors. Fatty Wynn was looking in a contemplative way at an empty lemonade glass and a plate upon which two small crumbs were discernible. He looked round as Figgins tapped him on the shoulder.

"Coming to the meeting?" asked Figgins.

"D'Arcy's meeting?"

"No, my meeting."

"You holding a meeting, too?"

"I'm calling a general meeting of the Fourth Form and the Shell at five in the Form-room," said Figgins, with some dignity.

"So is Gussy."

"Never mind Gussy; are you coming? I suppose you are going to back me up."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Fatty Wynn hesitatingly. "I've been rather done by D'Arcy. He said there would be refreshments at the meeting, and when I made him come to the point, his precious refreshments came down to a bun and a bottle of lemonade, and he gave me the threepence to get them. I thought I might as well have them here, and I've had them. He led me to expect a feed on tarts and buns and cake, and it was a disappointment."

"Hard cheese!" said Figgins sympathetically.

"Yes, it was, rather. I'm bound to attend the meeting, but if you're giving one the same place and time, I shall back you up."

"Good!"

"Will there be any refreshments?"

"Certainly. Every fellow coming to the meeting will be entitled to——"

"Now you're talking."

"To stand himself anything he can pay for——"

"Oh!"

"And there will be absolutely no restrictions. Anybody who likes, too, can stand a bottle of ginger-beer for the chairman—that's me."

"Oh!"

"I'm glad you're going to back me up, Fatty, and I hope you'll have a nice feed. I say, Blake, are you coming to the meeting?"

"First I've heard of it," said Jack Blake.

"I'm calling it at five in the Form-room, to discuss our grievances——"

"I wefuse to allow you to state anythin' of the sort, Figgins," said D'Arcy, coming into the tuckshop. "I am callin' the meetin' at five——"

"Oh, cheese it!"

"I wefuse to cheese it. I am callin' the meetin' to discuss a brilliant plan that has flashed into my b'wain for stoppin' Mr. Watcliff's funny twicks."

"Look here, Gussy——"

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

"I tell you——"

"Pway let me finish——"

"The trouble is that you never will finish——"

"Are you two chaps going to keep on like a couple of giddy gramophones?" asked Jack Blake. "Because if you're not getting tired, I am."

"It's like this, Blake——"

"It's pweccisely like this, deah boy——"

"I don't want to know what it's like. If you're both anxious to be in the Form-room at five o'clock, you can come along to my meeting——"

"Eh?"

"What?"

"I am calling a meeting at five o'clock in the Fourth Form-room," explained Blake, "for the purpose of discussing the situation and propounding a plan I have formed for putting Ratty in his place."

"Bai Jove!"

"Herries and Dig and Walsh and Reilly are coming——"

"There'll be a row if you start holding a meeting while I'm holding mine," said Figgins warmly.

"Yaas, wathah, and there will be a wov if eithah of you starts holdin' a meetin' while I'm holdin' mine."

"Rats! I tell you——"

"Hallo, Blake; hallo, Figgins!" said Skimpole, the brainy member of the Shell, coming into the tuckshop, and blinking

at the excited juniors through his spectacles. "I'm glad to see you, and you, too, D'Arcy. I want to speak to you——"

"Oh, go and eat coke!"

"That is almost dead, Blake. I want to speak to you very particularly. I am calling a meeting——"

"Eh?"

"Of the Fourth Form and the Shell——"

"What?"

"To be held in the Form-room at five, to discuss——ow! What's the matter? Stop shoving me—Figgins—don't poke me like that, Blake—let go my collar, D'Arcy! Oh! Leggo! Ow!"

But they did not let go, and the latest caller of meetings was bumped out of the tuckshop and bumped on the deck, and left there in a state of complete bewilderment.

CHAPTER 7.

A Mixed Meeting.

PING-PING!

"Five o'clock," said Tom Merry, rising from his deck chair and stretching himself, and then carefully folding up his "Magnet" and putting it in his pocket: "Time for the giddy meeting!"

He crossed to where Lowther was leaning back in his chair, with his yachting cap over his face, and shook him. Lowther yawned and sat upright.

"What's wanted?"

"You are. We're going to the meeting."

"Oh, blow the meeting!"

"May as well go along. I hear that most of the Shell are going, and we don't want to be left out. Besides, we ought to keep those kids in order."

"Something in that," said Lowther, getting up. "Are you coming, Manners, old man?"

Manners was leaning on the rail. He straightened up with a grunt.

"Yes, I suppose so. Something has got to be done about Ratty, but I don't believe in trusting it into the hands of those junior kids."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Well, I expect it will be left to us to suggest a way out of the difficulty. Let's get along, anyway."

They descended from the promenade to the upper deck, and found quite a number of juniors, belonging to both Houses, making their way aft to the Fourth Form-room.

When they reached it they found it already pretty full. Skimpole spotted them as they entered, and came towards them.

"You have come to my meeting!" he asked.

The Terrible Three stared at him.

"Your meeting, Skimpy!" said Tom Merry. "Are you holding a meeting, then?"

"Yes, I am calling a meeting of the Fourth Form and the Shell to discuss the outrageous conduct of Mr. Ratcliff, as exemplified in his act of tyranny to-day——"

"My hat! That's a strong word for a caning."

"Caning!" said Skimpole, blinking through his glasses.

"Who's talking about a caning?"

"What are you talking about, then?"

"About Mr. Ratcliff's wholly unjustifiable act of tyranny to-day. He has had the astounding cheek to confiscate my book on Socialism—I mean the book I am writing, you know, which is destined to revolutionise thought in two hemispheres, to bring the dawn of hope to the down-trodden millions, and to——"

"Oh, ring off, Skimpy!"

"Well, he has confiscated it," said the amateur Socialist of St. Jim's. "He found me making up my notes for the two hundred and eighty-fourth chapter, and took it all away from me. What do you think of that?"

"It would serve him right to have to read it."

"Oh, really, Merry! You see, I can't get on with the book till I get my notes back. I was working at my chapter on the evolution of the idea of personal responsibility considered as a factor in the problem of——"

"Cheese it, old chap! You may know what you are talking about, but I don't! And I really don't want to!"

Skimpole nodded.

"Yes, I was thoughtless to suppose that your naturally feeble intellect could take any interest in such matters, which are far beyond your comprehension," he agreed. "But, at least, you are sufficiently intelligent to understand that I cannot get on with my work till I get my notes back."

"Does it matter?" asked Manners, yawning.

"I am surprised at the question, Manners. When my work is published, civilisation will take a great leap forward. Meanwhile, the clock of human progress is stopped. As I have pointed out in my seventy-ninth chapter——"

"Bai Jove, deah boys, I'm glad to see you have awwived!"

"I am speaking to Merry, D'Arcy."

"So am I, deah boy!"

"You are interrupting me. I was explaining that in my

Seventy-ninth chapter, dealing with the great truths of Determinism, I point out that—

"Oh, wing off, Skimpole, old chap! We haven't time for all that wot now. So you've come to the meeting, Tom Mewwy?"

"Well, I've come to a meeting," said Tom Merry, with some stress upon the indefinite article. "I don't quite know whose meeting it is."

"Mine, deah boys! Come up to the fwont; I am just goin' to make my speech."

"There are some occasions," said Lowther, "when, without being unduly modest, a fellow would rather take a back seat. This is one of them."

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Hallo," exclaimed Blake, coming up, "I'm glad you chaps have come. I wanted the Shell to be represented at my meeting—"

"Your meetin', Blake!"

"Certainly!"

"Oh, don't talk wot, deah boy! Tom Mewwy has come to my meetin'—"

"Now, look here, Gussy—"

"Gentlemen of the Fourth Form—"

It was Figgins's voice, ringing through the room, and dominating the ceaseless buzz of talk. Everyone turned to look at Figgins. He was mounted upon a form, and the Co. were ranged on either side of him. There were a considerable number of New House juniors supporting their chief.

"Hear, hear!" shouted Kerr and Wynn.

"Gentlemen of the Fourth Form of St. Jim's, and you Shell chaps, we are now met on a solemn occasion charged with the destinies of the Lower Forms."

"Hear, hear!"

"Bai Jove, I cannot allow this. Figgins, you wottah, get down immediately. You have no right to address my meetin'."

"Gentlemen, the time has come when we cannot—"

"Cheese it!" bawled Blake. "What do you mean by addressing my meeting, Figgins? I've called this meeting to discuss—"

"When we cannot submit any longer to the—"

"Rats!"

"Get down!"

"Go it, Figgy!"

"Boo!"

"—cannot any longer submit to the tyranny of Ratty—"

"Hear, hear."

"And I therefore call upon you—"

"I wufuse to give my permish—"

"Get down!"

"I therefore call upon you—"

"Yah!"

"Order!"

"I'll jolly soon have order," exclaimed Blake. "I'm not going to have my meeting scoffed under my eyes like this."

And he rushed towards the speaker. A couple of New House juniors barred the way, and the next moment Blake was rolling on the floor struggling desperately with Pratt and Jimson. That was more than Digby and Herries were likely to stand, of course, and they rushed to the rescue immediately. Kerr and Fatty Wynn immediately joined in, and then several other juniors on both sides. The din was terrific, and though Figgins was still talking, not a word could be heard.

Tom Merry was laughing almost hysterically. Everybody in the Form-room was either laughing, hooting, or shouting, and it was like Babel. Kerr went down with Digby on his chest, and Figgins, giving up the attempt to make himself heard, jumped off the form to aid his chums. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy jumped on the table, and waved his hand frantically for silence.

"I address this honourable meetin'—"

"Shut up!"

"Order!"

"What I wish to point out is that Mr. Ratcliff's conduct was wholly unjustifiable. In the seventy-ninth chapter of my book—"

"Order!"

"My view of the mattah is this—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry, "I don't think I shall make a speech after all. Go it, Gussy! Go it, Skimpy! Buck up, Figgins."

The door opened, and Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, looked in. Monteith, the head prefect of the New House, was looking over his shoulder.

"Hold that fearful row," shouted the captain of St. Jim's.

"Do you hear me? Hold that row!"

"I am addressin' the meetin'—"

"In the seventy-ninth and eightieth chapters of my book, I point out—"

"Gentlemen of the Fourth—"

"Shut up," bawled Monteith, "you'll have Mr. Ratcliff here in a moment."

The name of the senior master had some effect. The noise subsided, and most of the excited combatants separated.

"Now then," exclaimed Kildare, "what's the row about?"

"You are labourin' undah a misapprehension, Kildare. There is no wow—this is a meetin' of the juniors to quietly discuss—"

"You young ass."

"I wufuse to be called a young ass. I—"

"Shut up this row at once," said Kildare. "If you—"

"Thank you, Kildare," interrupted a thin, acid voice. "I will take the matter into my hands."

And Mr. Ratcliff entered the room.

CHAPTER 8.

Mr. Ratcliff Comes Down Heavy.

MR. RATCLIFF stood beside the prefects surveying the disordered scene. There was a glint in his green-grey eyes that meant trouble. Both Kildare and Monteith looked flushed and annoyed. They did not like having the matter taken out of their hands in this cavalier way.

An uncomfortable silence fell upon the room. The fact that the noisy meeting had been called to discuss the actions of the unpopular master added to the awkwardness of the situation.

"It seems that the juniors will never learn discipline," Mr. Ratcliff remarked, in his dry, satiric voice. "What is the cause of this totally inexcusable hullabaloo?"

"If you please, sir," said Kildare firmly, "Monteith and I were dealing with the matter."

"I am dealing with it now, Kildare."

"We are the head prefects of the two houses, and quite capable of doing our duty, sir," said the captain of the school, undauntedly. "I think the matter should be left in our hands."

"I disagree with you, Kildare."

"No other master at St. Jim's would bring the prefects into contempt by a public slight like this," flashed out Kildare.

"I do not wish to argue the matter with you."

"I agree with Kildare," said Monteith, who had at one time been very "thick" with the New House master, but much less so since a friendship had grown up between him and Kildare. "I think—"

"You need not tell me what you think, Monteith," said Mr. Ratcliff coldly. "I have come upon a scene of disgraceful noise and disorder. I shall deal with it myself, that is all. Boys—"

There was a perceptible hiss at the back of the room. Mr. Ratcliff paused, and his sallow face went scarlet.

"What boy was that?" he rapped out savagely.

There was no reply to the question, but the hiss was repeated from several quarters at once. The housemaster looked round him.

"Reilly, you hissed."

The Irish junior hesitated for a moment.

"Sure, and I did," he replied frankly.

"You will take two hundred lines—"

"Faith, and I—"

"Take three hundred lines."

"Shame!" said a voice at the back of the crowd of juniors, and a murmur followed.

Mr. Ratcliff's eyes seemed to flame.

"Who called out?" he demanded, harshly.

"Shame!"

"Lowther, that was you."

"Yes, sir," said Monty Lowther, in the negligent, imperturbable manner which was wholly his own. "Quite so, sir."

"You—you dare to say—"

"Yes, sir."

"You will take five hundred lines, Lowther."

"Certainly, sir."

"And every boy concerned in this disgraceful disturbance," said Mr. Ratcliff, "will take one hundred lines." There was a murmur. "Every boy in this room will take one hundred lines, and bring them to me before bedtime this evening," said the New House master harshly.

The juniors exchanged fierce glances. That sentence meant the loss of the evening for all of them; it meant weary writing and re-writing instead of their usual amusements. There was a hiss again.

"And in future," said Mr. Ratcliff, "meetings in the Fourth Form-room are prohibited. I shall look to the prefects to see this order carried out."

"Meetings in the Form-rooms are always allowed at St. Jim's, sir," said Kildare, coldly.

"Possibly; but they will not be allowed on board the Condor."

"Dr. Holmes would not approve—"

"You will please refrain from passing any opinion on my measures, Kildare. Your duty is to see them carried out."

Kildare's eyes blazed. Although the best-tempered fellow in the world, he had a hot Irish nature, and was peculiarly irritated by the small, pecking ways of Mr. Ratcliff.

"I do not consider that my duty," he exclaimed.

"If you are to remain a prefect, Kildare, you will obey my orders and carry out my instructions."

"I have no desire to remain a prefect under your direction, sir," said Kildare, "I am perfectly willing to resign."

"And I am at one with Kildare in this matter," said Monteith, promptly. "If Kildare resigns, I resign also."

"You had better leave the room, I think," said Mr. Ratcliff harshly. The two prefects walked out without a word.

"Let there be no repetition of this scene," said Mr. Ratcliff, with a warning glance at the juniors. "You will disperse immediately and write your lines." And he followed the prefects.

"Shame!"

"Rats!"

Mr. Ratcliff heard the words distinctly, but he felt that it was better to affect to hear nothing. Tom Merry closed the door after him with unnecessary violence, and there was a buzz in the room at once.

"The rotter!"

"The beast!"

"The pig!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Who says mutiny?"

"I do!"

"And I."

"Hold on," exclaimed Tom Merry, "I've got an idea——"

"This meeting was called for me to explain my ideas on the subject," said Figgins warmly.

"Rot!" said Blake, emphatically. "This meeting was called by me to explain my views of the matter, and——"

"Bai Jove! as a mattah of fact this meetin' was called by me to——"

"Oh, hold on," exclaimed Tom Merry, "don't start all that again. I've got a wheeze to make Ratty sit up, in a way he can't touch us for."

"Well, in that case we'll give you a chance," said Blake.

"Two minutes for Tom Merry. Two minutes is quite enough."

"Yaas, wathah."

"Too much for a mouldy old School House wheeze," said Figgins. "Make it one minute, and keep him up to time."

"Shut up, Figgins——"

"Rats!"

"I say, listen to me," said Tom Merry appealingly. "It's a ripping wheeze to make him sing small, and make him look a silly ass, and he can't touch us."

"Go on, Tommy."

"On the ball."

"We've all got a fearful heap of lines to do——"

"We know that."

"We've got to hand them in before bedtime——"

"We know that too."

"But Ratty didn't specify what lines we were to write——"

"Oh, any old lines would do," said Blake.

"Yes, and that's where my idea comes in. Why shouldn't we write out lines from Shakespeare?"

"We could if we liked, I suppose," said Blake. "But where the idea comes in is a mystery to me. Do you call that an idea?"

"Yes I do—because there are some special lines in Shakespeare that fit the case, and describe Ratty to a T."

"Oh, I see."

"Time you did. You all know the lines, about the japes a fellow plays when he's dressed up in a little brief authority——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'll look them out in Manners' Shakespeare and get 'em correct, and we'll all write out those lines——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And all take 'em in to Ratty before bedtime."

There was a roar of uncontrollable laughter in the Form-room. The joke seemed to the juniors to be execrable. The lines were innocent enough in themselves, and Mr. Ratcliff could not find fault with them without flagrant injustice. Yet their application to himself would be unmistakable.

"Is it a go?" demanded Tom Merry.

"Yes, rather! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake. "It's the best thing I've heard for a dog's age." And he thumped Tom Merry heartily on the shoulder. Figgins was thumping him with equal appreciation on the other shoulder, and the result was that Tom Merry staggered forward, and had to clasp Arthur Augustus D'Arcy round the neck to save himself from falling. There was a wail from the swell of the School House as his new collar crumpled up.

"Pway wolease me, Tom Mewwy. That's the second collar I've wuined to-day."

"Sorry, my son. It was these two dangerous lunatics——"

"Hurrah!" shouted Blake. "It's a ripping wheeze. We'll start on the lines directly after ten."

And the meeting of the juniors broke up, the boys in remarkably high spirits, considering that each of them had a heavy imposition to write out.

CHAPTER 9.

The Imposition.

"THERE is something going forward among the juniors, I believe," Mr. Linton remarked to Mr. Railton, as they met on the promenade deck after tea.

The sun was going down towards the cliffs of England, and the dusk gathering on the wide waters of the North Sea. The sturdy figure of Captain Bolsover was statuesque on the bridge. Senior boys were sitting about the upper decks, but not a single junior was to be seen.

The School House master nodded in reply to Mr. Linton's remark.

"I think so, too. How is it that none of them came on deck after tea?"

"I am afraid there is mischief afoot. Perhaps Kildare can tell us something." The master of the Shell beckoned to Kildare, who had just come up. The captain of St. Jim's came towards the masters.

"Do you know why the juniors are below?" asked Mr. Railton.

"They all have impositions to do, sir," said Kildare quietly.

"All of them?"

"Yes, sir; all the Shell and the Fourth."

Mr. Railton compressed his lips.

"Imposed by Mr. Ratcliff, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. They were making rather a row in the Fourth Form-room, and he started on them. They've got about enough to do to keep them busy till bedtime."

"This is very curious," observed Mr. Linton. "The juniors did not look as if they had heavy impositions to do at tea-time. They looked quite in high spirits."

"I observed that myself," Mr. Railton remarked. "And there was a great deal of whispering, too, and chuckling."

Kildare grinned.

"I believe there is something on, sir," he replied; "but I can't quite guess what it is. The Shell are in their room, writing away, and the Fourth Form are in theirs, doing the same. I've looked in at both rooms, and they're just writing, quietly enough."

"It is very curious."

The dusk of the evening deepened, and the stars came out in the deep blue sky. The lights of the Condor gleamed through the night. From various points on the dark sea glimmered light after light, from the riding-lights of smacks to the red and green headlights of throbbing steamers.

Mr. Railton came on the promenade deck and sat down in his chair there. He was not a companionable man, and he preferred to smoke his cigar by himself. It was getting towards time for the juniors' supper, when Tom Merry came on deck.

The promenade of the Condor was well-lighted, and as Tom Merry came up Mr. Railton glanced towards him, and clearly saw the expression of his face. He read the twinkle in the eye, and the curve of the lips aright. There was something "on."

Yet otherwise the hero of the Shell looked innocent enough. He had a number of foolscap pages in his hand, and was evidently coming to show up his imposition to Mr. Ratcliff, according to orders.

He had chosen his moment well, if he wanted an audience. Mr. Railton, Mr. Linton, and Mr. Latham were all near the rail, a few paces from the senior master. Kildare, Darel, and Monteith were chattering close at hand. There were a dozen other seniors within view, and Captain Bolsover was chatting with Mr. Railton. The captain of the Condor had a hint of the difficulties among his passengers, but it was no business of his, and he never ventured a remark on the matter.

Mr. Ratcliff looked up at the sight of the junior with the paper in his hand. He smiled sourly and held out his hand for it.

"Ah, this is your imposition, I suppose, Merry?"

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry demurely.

"I hope you have written it better than the last you gave in to me. Otherwise I shall require you to write it again."

"If you please, sir——"

"I want no excuses."

"If you please, sir, I'm not making excuses. I only wanted to say that I've written out some lines from Shakespeare, as you did not specify what the lines were to be."

"Very good," said Mr. Ratcliff.

He held up the paper in the light and read; and a change came over his face. Mr. Linton, who was looking at him, gave a start of amazement. For the senior master's brow was like a thundercloud, and his eyes were glinting with fury. For this is what Mr. Ratcliff read:

"Man, vain man,

Dressed in a little brief authority,

Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven

As make the angels weep."

Those four lines were repeated twenty-five times, to make up the required hundred.

Mr. Ratcliff did not trouble to look down the page. One glance was sufficient for him.

"So this—this is your imposition, Merry!" he said, so thickly that his words could hardly be understood.

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry cheerfully.

"You—you have dared to write this?"

The junior looked surprised.

"Isn't it written all right, sir?"

"You—you know what I mean. This unparalleled insolence!" panted Mr. Ratcliff. "This unheard-of audacity—these lines!"

"They're not my lines, sir," said Tom Merry. "I didn't make them up, sir. Shakespeare wrote them."

"You will take a thousand lines, Merry," gasped Mr. Ratcliff.

"Yes, sir. Will the same lines do?"

"No!" thundered the New House master. "You will write out a thousand lines from *Æneid*, Merry."

"Very well, sir."

"Now go!"

Mr. Ratcliff screwed up the paper and pitched it over the rail. Tom Merry quietly retired. Jack Blake was the next junior to bring up his imposition.

"My lines, sir," he said, stopping before the New House master, and raising his cap.

Mr. Ratcliff, still looking very disturbed and angry, took the paper and glanced at it. Then his glance became fixed, for this is what he read:

"Man, vain man,
Dressed in a little brief authority,
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As make the angels weep."

Mr. Ratcliff turned purple.

"Blake!" he thundered.

"Yes, sir. I hope the lines are all right, sir. They're from Shakespeare, sir. I thought I'd make a change from Virgil, as you didn't mention what lines they were to be."

"You will write out a thousand lines from the *Æneid*, Blake!"

"What for, sir?"

"For this unheard-of insolence!"

"What insolence, sir?"

"Another word and I will cane you, Blake!"

"Very well, sir; but I think it very hard that I should have to write out a thousand lines for nothing."

And he retired looking very much injured. Every spectator of the scene was looking on with smiles now. They could see that there was something in the impositions that throw the senior master into a rage, though they could not guess what it was.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was the next junior to appear. He had quite a roll of papers, with his big writing sprawling over them. He raised his silk hat very politely to Mr. Ratcliff and presented the sheets.

"My imposition, sir."

Mr. Ratcliff glanced at the imposition. He read there those famous lines from Shakespeare, with which he was now growing familiar. He sprang to his feet. "D'Arcy, this is a scheme, a plot, I can see that! Follow me to my cabin!"

"What for, sir?"

"I am going to cane you."

"Bai Jove!"

Mr. Ratcliff stalked away to the steps. D'Arcy looked after him, and then turned to his Form master, Mr. Lathom.

"Pway excuse me, Mr. Lathom, but can you see anythin' wrong with my imposition?" he asked.

The master of the Fourth glanced at it. Then he rubbed his glasses and looked again. Then he smiled.

"D'Arcy, you should not have—er—written that."

"But Mr. Ratcliff gave me the imposition, sir."

"Yes—er—but—"

"He did not specify what lines we were to write, sir."

"No, but—ha, ha—I mean ahem! Mr. Ratcliff is looking back for you. You had better follow him."

"But am I weally to be caned for nothin', sir? I wegard that as wathah wotten."

"Come, come, you must go at once."

D'Arcy, with an injured expression, followed the senior master. He left little Mr. Lathom smiling. The lines so exactly hit off the character of Mr. Ratcliff that it was impossible not to see the application and to enjoy the joke.

"What is it?" asked Mr. Railton, leaning towards the Fourth Form master. "What was there so amusing in D'Arcy's lines, Mr. Lathom?"

"It is a—a—what the boys call a wheeze, I think," said Mr. Lathom, with a quiet chuckle. "It seems that Mr. Ratcliff did not specify what lines they were to write, and they have chosen some from Shakespeare."

"No harm in that."

"No, only in the application of the lines to the peculiar

circumstances of the case." And Mr. Lathom repeated the lines.

Mr. Railton laughed heartily.

"Ratcliff has provoked it," he said. "But the boys are acting within their rights, and if he were wiser he would take no notice of the hidden reflection upon himself. It would be far wiser to affect not to see it."

"True; but Ratcliff is not wise, I am afraid."

A loud howl was heard from below. Mr. Railton compressed his lips.

"That is D'Arcy being caned," Mr. Lathom remarked.

The School House master nodded gloomily.

"I am afraid this situation is too difficult to last," he said.

"Ratcliff is the man to assume boundless authority, but not to make himself respected. His whole system is to meddle and interfere. There will be trouble."

And the master of the School House was right.

CHAPTER 10.

The Sufferers!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY received three cuts on each hand in Mr. Ratcliff's study, but he might have been receiving three hundred by the noise he made. At the first cut he gave a terrific howl which was heard half over the steamer, and it made the senior master jump a little himself.

"Hold your noise," he exclaimed fiercely.

"Yaas, but it hurts, sir," said D'Arcy.

"Silence, D'Arcy! The other hand."

"Certainly, sir."

D'Arcy received the second cut, and gave a yell like a Red Indian on the warpath. The New House master glared at him.

"Silence!"

"Yaas, wathah, sir! But it hurts, you know."

"The other hand again."

Another cut, and another terrific whoop. This time the sound rang fore and aft on the Condor, and was heard by the captain on the bridge, and the hands about the ship. And the same result followed every cut, till Mr. Ratcliff was finished. The New House master was in a state of simmering fury by that time. The yelling from the cabin would give everyone on board the impression that he was using the junior cruelly, and cause unpleasant remarks to be passed. Mr. Ratcliff was spiteful by nature, but he did not wish that circumstance to become the general topic of the steamer.

He threw down the cane with a scowl.

"You may go, D'Arcy."

"Yaas, sir."

And the swell of St. Jim's quitted the cabin. Outside he met Monty Lowther, who was coming along with a paper in his hand.

"Hurt?" asked Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah! The beast laid it on vewy hard."

"You could be heard all over the ship."

Arthur Augustus grinned.

"Yaas, I thought so. Have you got your imposition there?"

"Yes; here it is."

"You'll get the beastly cane, too. Watty is in a foahful wax. Mind you make a dweadful wow and keep up the game."

"Yes, rather!" grinned Lowther, and he tapped at Mr. Ratcliff's door and entered. The master was looking very heated.

"My imposition, sir," said Lowther meekly.

He laid it on the table. Mr. Ratcliff glanced at it, and stopped only to read a couple of lines.

"Man, vain man."

Dressed in a little brief authority."

That was enough for Mr. Ratcliff. He jumped up and grasped the cane, his face inflamed with rage.

"Hold out your hand, Lowther," he thundered.

"My—my hand, sir?" said Lowther, looking very surprised.

"Yes, your hand. Quick."

"Isn't my impot all right, sir?"

"Will you hold out your hand, or shall I thrash you?" shouted the senior master.

"Oh, very well, sir; but I should like to know what I am being punished for!" said Monty Lowther, with the air of a martyr.

He held out his hand, and received a cut that almost justified the terrific yell he uttered the next moment. Another cut, and another fearful yell.

Mr. Ratcliff breathed hard through his nose. He would have given Lowther as many as D'Arcy, but he felt that it would not do. The boy was yelling as if he were being seriously injured, and Mr. Ratcliff thought of the looks he would have to face on deck afterwards.

"You may go, Lowther."

"Thank you, sir."

About a minute after Monty Lowther left the cabin, Herries presented himself with his impot. Mr. Ratcliff was no longer surprised when he read those famous lines. It was quite clear

to him that the whole thing was a plot, and that he would see no other line than those.

"Herries," he said, as quietly as he could, "who suggested to you to write these lines?"

Herries looked surprised. Herries was sometimes rather dense, and sometimes he chose to appear denser than he was.

"Why, it was you, sir," he replied.

"I? What do you mean?"

"Yes, sir. Don't you remember, sir, you gave us these lines because you found us rowing in the Form-room?"

Mr. Ratcliff snapped his teeth.

"I do not mean that, Herries. I mean, who suggested to you these particular lines from Shakespeare?"

"Are they particular lines, sir?"

"Herries—pah; you are too utterly stupid to understand! You may go."

"Yes, sir. Is my imposition all right, sir?"

"Go!" thundered Mr. Ratcliff. And Herries went.

Manners came in next. Manners had more lines to do than any of the others; but they were the same lines, endlessly repeated on quite a sheaf of papers. Mr. Ratcliff gave the lines only a glance. They were very well written, in Manners' neat, legible hand, and there was no fault at all to be found with the execution.

"Manners," said Mr. Ratcliff harshly, "you deserve to be caned for this insolence, but I will pardon you if you will tell me who is at the bottom of this affair."

"What affair, sir?"

"You know perfectly well that these lines have been written in direct insolence to myself."

Manners shook his head.

"I don't see how that can be possible, sir. Shakespeare wrote those lines a long time before you were born, sir, so he can't have meant them as a reflection upon you."

Mr. Ratcliff's eyes glinted. Herries might be dense, but Manners was quizzing, and he knew it perfectly well. The master picked up the cane.

"Hold out your hand, Manners!"

"My hand, sir?" said Manners, as if he thought that Mr. Ratcliff might possibly have meant his foot.

"Obey me, Manners!"

"Certainly, sir."

Manners received a sharp cut, and immediately sent forth a yell that echoed through the steamer. Mr. Ratcliff jumped.

"What did you do that for, Manners?"

"It hurts, sir."

"This—this is a plot!" exclaimed Mr. Ratcliff, almost foaming by this time. "This is a concerted plan among you."

"I always yell when I'm hurt, sir," said Manners, innocently.

"Shall I hold out the other hand, sir?"

"Leave my cabin."

Manners went out, and passed Figgins coming in. Figgins nodded to him with a grin, and came in and laid his impact on the table. Mr. Ratcliff gave it a glance.

"Figgins, was it your idea to write these lines?"

"My idea, sir?" said Figgins, to gain time.

"Yes; or was it suggested to you by another?"

"Is there anything wrong with the lines, sir?"

"You know perfectly well they are intended as insolence to myself. If you were the originator of the scheme—"

"What scheme, sir?"

"This scheme to treat me with disrespect."

"Oh, sir! We always show you as much respect as we feel, sir," said Figgins.

Mr. Ratcliff picked up his cane again.

"Very well, Figgins, unless you tell me the name of the boy who proposed this freak, I shall punish you."

Figgins held out his hand without a word. The cane came down with a whiz, and the cut was severe. But Figgins might have been in the jaws of a tiger by the fearful shriek he gave.

"Figgins, be silent."

"I'm hurt," said Figgins.

"Leave my cabin."

Figgins went out. Mr. Ratcliff breathed hard and mopped his perspiring forehead. He began to feel that he was getting the worst of the contest with the juniors of St. Jim's. He had power on his side, but power is not always strong against ridicule. He knew that he was already ridiculous in the eyes of all on board. And there was more to come!

Reilly of the Fourth was the next junior in. He showed up his lines, with a lurking grin on his face that was too much for the patience of Mr. Ratcliff. Without wasting words, Mr. Ratcliff seized the junior by the collar and began to lash him with the cane. Reilly struggled and wriggled, and let out a dreadful yell at every lash.

"Ow! Wow! Ah! Mercy! Murder! Help!"

Reilly was hurt, but on ordinary occasions he would take his punishment without a word. His yells now were plainly part of the scheme, but Mr. Ratcliff did not know how to stop them. He could do nothing but cane the junior, and he was doing that already. He lashed harder, with savage energy, and Reilly's terrific roars sounded through the ship from end to end.

"Help! Murder! Ow!"

Mr. Ratcliff desisted at last from sheer terror, lest the junior's yells should bring half the ship's company rushing in alarm to the cabin.

"Get out of the room, Reilly!" he panted.

"Faith, and I'll be glad to," gasped Reilly. "Sure and I'm kilt intirely."

He scuttled out of the cabin. A minute later, and Kerr presented himself at the open door, with a sheet in his hand.

"My imposition, sir."

Mr. Ratcliff glared at him.

"You can go."

"But my lines, sir!"

"The—the juniors are excused from showing up the lines," said Mr. Ratcliff thickly. "The—the imposition is rescinded."

"Very well, sir."

And Kerr retired grinning.

CHAPTER 11.

Tom Merry Owes Up!

"H A, ha, ha!"

"Hear us smile!"

"We are victorious! Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors had met in the Shell class-room. Meetings in the Fourth-Form room were stopped, but nothing had been said so far about the Shell-room. And to that apartment at the fore end of the upper deck—formerly the third-class dining-saloon—the juniors of St. Jim's had retired to compare notes.

Those who had suffered castigation at the hands of Mr. Ratcliff were hurt. But they cared little. They had won the victory.

Mr. Ratcliff had been beaten hollow, and had shown it by rescinding the impositions. The juniors were in a jubilant mood.

"Hear us smile!" trilled Figgins. "This is where we gloat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It was wathah a wippin' ideah of yours, Tom Mewwy, about that quotation from Shakespeare," observed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I weally wondah that I didn't think of it myself."

"So you would have, if you'd had the brain," said Tom Merry cheerfully.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"I don't see what you are all gloating over," said Skimpole.

"The difficulty has not been solved. We—"

"We've made Ratty sing small."

"Yea, but—"

"We've made him take back his impots."

"I know, but—"

"We've made him look an ass to everybody on the ship."

"Quite so; but we haven't recovered the notes of my book which he has confiscated, and that is far more important than—"

"Oh, never mind your book."

"But I must mind it, Blake. It is most important. A new age is ready to dawn upon the world—a new epoch awaits the publication of my book—and I am stopped from enlightening the world simply by this—"

"Ring off, Skimmy! There's too much of you and your book. Now, as we're all met together again, I may as well tell you what I called the original meeting for."

"Hold on, Blake, deah boy. It was I who called the original meetin', for the purpose of explainin'—"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Figgins. "You School House chaps would talk the hind leg off a mule. The reason I called the original meeting was that—"

"Shut up, Figgins!"

"Pway wing off, deah boy!"

"Go it, Figg!"

"Oh, don't make such a row!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "We shall have Ratty down on us again in a minute."

"Well, that won't worry us much," said Kerr. "We're up against Ratty now, and it's a tug of war between us."

Kildare looked into the room. There was a smile upon the face of the handsome captain of St. Jim's.

"Bedtime, you youngsters."

"The meeting will have to be postponed till to-morrow," said Figgins. "After morning school, I'll explain—"

"Aftah mornin' school I'll explain—"

ANSWERS

NEXT THURSDAY: "THE WRECK OF THE FLOATING SCHOOL." A Grand Double-Length Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By Martin Clifford.

"Bedtime!" said Kildare, laughing. "Come, now, make a move, or you'll have to go to bed in the dark."

The juniors dispersed to their berths. The New House fellows were berthed forward on the main deck, and the School House aft. The boys had settled down into their places on board, and made themselves comfortable in their quarters. Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther had a cabin to themselves which contained four berths, one being left unoccupied, and serving as a sort of cupboard for their various properties. Blake, Digby, Herries, and D'Arcy had a little room with four berths in it, and nearly space enough to breathe, as Blake described it; but they were happy at being together, and they had christened their cabin "Study No. 6," in remembrance of their old quarters at St. Jim's.

The juniors went to bed in a jubilant mood. They had entered into a contest with the obnoxious master, and they felt that they had had the best of it.

Mr. Ratcliff had been forced to retract, and that was a very real victory. But the more thoughtful among the boys knew very well that this was only the beginning. On the morrow, in all probability, the struggle would be renewed.

"Ratty won't take this lying down," Lowther remarked, with the air of an oracle. "There will be a row to-morrow."

"Very likely," said Tom Merry, as he kicked off his boots. "But I don't see exactly what he can do."

"I think I have an idea. You remember Figgins told us he tried to get at the name of the chap who proposed the lines from Shakespeare?"

"Yes, mine," said Tom Merry, laughing.

"Well, he'll try again. He can't punish the whole of two Forms, but he can come down heavy on the ringleader, if he can, find him."

"But he can't," said Manners. "There's not a chap in the Shell or the Fourth who would give Tom away. Mellish or Gore might, but they'd never dare."

"You never know what Ratty will do," said Lowther.

And the Terrible Three went to bed. In spite of the excitement of the day and the anticipations of trouble on the morrow, they slept soundly enough, and did not awaken till the electric bell buzzed in the morning. They had become quite accustomed to their floating home, and reposed as calmly in the narrow berths as in the dormitory at the old college.

Mr. Ratcliff's face was gloomy in the dining-room the next morning, when the boys of St. Jim's went in to breakfast. He had evidently not forgotten the incidents of the previous day. There was a coldness between him and the other masters. His colleagues did not approve of his course of conduct any more than the boys did. But Mr. Ratcliff was the kind of man to be rendered only more obstinate by opposition.

It was a bright September day, and after morning lessons the boys went on deck in cheerful spirits. The wide North Sea lay shining round the churning steamer, dotted with craft. Tom Merry was whistling cheerily as he went up the stairs amidships, when Mr. Ratcliff called to him.

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry, turning round.

"Come into my cabin, Merry."

Tom Merry made a grimace, and followed the senior master into his cabin. There was an acid look upon Mr. Ratcliff's face that put him on his guard.

"Now, Merry," said the New House master, fixing his glinting eyes upon Tom, "I have a question to put to you."

"Yes, sir."

"Yesterday the juniors were guilty of the most unexampled insolence in the selection of the lines for the imposition I gave them."

"You did not specify what lines were to be written, sir, and—"

"Don't prevaricate, Merry."

Tom Merry turned red.

"I am not prevaricating," he replied hotly.

"Do you deny, then, that the lines written were intended to have a direct and disrespectful application to myself?"

Tom Merry was silent.

"Answer my question, Merry."

"Well, sir, if there was any truth in the application, that is not our fault, is it?"

"I did not ask you for further insolence, Merry."

"You asked me for an answer, sir."

"Very well, we will not argue the point," said Mr. Ratcliff, in a quiet tone of concentrated anger. "What I wish to know is, who was the ringleader in this matter? Who suggested writing those lines for the impositions?"

Tom Merry did not speak.

"Answer me, Merry."

"I have nothing to say, sir."

"Do you not know from whom the suggestion came?"

No reply.

"Ah, I perceive that you have courage enough only to be insolent," said Mr. Ratcliff, with a bitter smile. "I suppose it was absurd of me to expect you to own up to the truth."

Tom Merry flushed scarlet.

"You have no right to ask me the question, sir. Mr. Railton would not do so."

"We are not discussing now what Mr. Railton would do. If you are afraid to own up to what is true, I have no more to say to you, except that your cowardice is only equal to your insolence," said Mr. Ratcliff venomously.

Tom Merry's teeth came together hard.

"I am not afraid," he said. "I have done nothing wrong. It was I who suggested those lines for the imposition."

"I thought as much."

Tom Merry stood silent and defiant. He expected the master to take up his cane, but Mr. Ratcliff made no motion to do so.

"I have already learned, Merry, that you are the usual leader of the juniors in any act of insubordination or insolence," said the senior housemaster, in measured tones. "You have attempted to turn my authority and myself into ridicule. For that only the most exemplary punishment will suffice. No, I am not going to cane you, Merry. That has been tried without effect. I am going to flog you."

Tom Merry started.

At St. Jim's boys were sometimes flogged, but the punishment was rare, and was never administered by anybody but the Head himself. And Dr. Holmes had very, very seldom found it necessary. Tom Merry had never dreamed that even the influence of his "little brief authority" would carry Mr. Ratcliff so far as this. He drew in a quick breath.

"You are going to flog me, sir!"

"Yes. I am going to flog you in public," said Mr. Ratcliff, dwelling on the words with evident relish. "The Forms will be mustered on deck, as in the Hall at St. Jim's, and you will be flogged in the sight of all, as an example to the rest."

Tom Merry turned pale. A flogging was bad enough in itself. A public flogging was ten times worse. But a flogging in sight of the ship's company, as well as of the boys belonging to the school, was intolerable.

"You have only yourself to thank for this, Merry," said Mr. Ratcliff. "I shall give you twelve strokes in public, and I think that will have the desired effect."

"I will not submit."

The words seemed to be torn from the boy. But Mr. Ratcliff only smiled in his sour, sardonic way.

"Go on deck, Merry, and await me there."

"I will not be flogged!"

"Go on deck!" thundered the master.

Tom Merry turned and slowly left the cabin. He understood it all—the bitter humiliation that was intended to humble and cow him, and break his spirit. To be stripped and flogged in public, with the seamen looking on, and the officers on the bridge witnessing his humiliation—it seemed to the proud lad that he would rather die!

Mr. Ratcliff stepped to the door and called out to Knox and Sefton. Knox was a School House prefect, a bully, and extremely unpopular with the lower Forms. Sefton belonged to the New House, and was in the Sixth. Both were on the worst of terms with Tom Merry & Co., and Mr. Ratcliff knew that he could depend upon them now, when Kildare or Monteith would certainly have failed him.

"I have decided that Tom Merry is to be flogged in public, Knox," he said. "He has confessed to being the ringleader in the juniors' insolence yesterday. I shall require your help."

"Certainly, sir," said Knox cordially. "I've thought for a long time that it was just what he needed, only Kildare has always taken his part against me."

"Kildare has no voice in this matter. The flogging will take place at half-past twelve, and I shall require you both there."

"Certainly, sir," said Knox and Sefton together.

And Mr. Ratcliff walked away, to give orders for the assembling of the Forms on deck.

CHAPTER 12.

Mr. Ratcliff is Determined!

TOM MERRY came up on the promenade, and his expression at once attracted attention. Manners and Lowther joined him in a moment.

"What's the trouble?" asked both together.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "What's the beastly twouble, deah boy?"

Tom Merry smiled faintly.

"Nothing; but I am to be flogged."

"Flogged!"

"Yes—and in public."

"My hat!"

"Before all the school, and before the hands about the steamer," said Tom Merry bitterly. "A sort of exhibition, you know."

"The—the bound!" muttered Lowther, pale with rage.

"The cowardly brute!"

"Oh, it's all right—I'm not going to stand it."

Manners looked anxious. There was an expression on Tom Merry's face that alarmed him a little.



'I am calling a meeting at five in the Form-room, to discuss our grievances,' said Figgins. 'I refuse to allow you to state anything of the sort, Figgins!' said D'Arcy, coming into the tuck-shop. 'I am callin' the meeting at five!'

"I say, Tom, old man, what are you going to do?"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"I don't know."

"You'll have to knuckle under."

"I shall not knuckle under."

"But how—?"

"I don't know. But I won't be flogged. He shall kill me first. I've made up my mind about that," said Tom Merry between his teeth.

The chums of the Shell looked worried and anxious. When Tom Merry spoke like that, they knew that his mind was made up, his resolution irrevocably fixed. But what was to be done?

"Bai Jove!" muttered D'Arcy. "The wottah is passin' the limit, you know. We shall have to stop him somehow."

And the swell of St. Jim's walked over to his chums, who were sitting on the rail, with a very dejected air. Blake, Herries, and Digby were sitting on the top rail, with the heels of their boots hooked on the lower one, and apparently unconscious of the danger of their position.

"Wherefore that worried look, Gustavus?" asked Blake. "You look as if you had lost your last threepenny bit and the last bus home."

"Pway don't wot, Blake. This is a sewious mattah."

"Anything happened to your silk hat?"

"No; it is not so sewious as that, but it is vewy sewious. Tom Mewwy is goin' to be flogged on deck."

Blake nearly fell over the rail in his amazement.

"Tom Merry! Flogged!"

"Yaas. wathab."

"My only hat! Ratty is coming it too strong!"

"Tom Mewwy says he will not submit, but I weally do not see what he is to do. You see, deah boys, force is on the side of Mr. Watchliff. He will call on the pwefects to hold him, you know."

"Kildare wouldn't do it, or Darrel."

"Nor Rushden," said Digby, "nor Monteith. But Knox would, and jump at the chance."

"Look here, if Tom Merry won't knuckle under, we're going to back him up," exclaimed Blake excitedly. "We're not going to stand—"

"Blake," said little Mr. Lathom, coming along with a troubled look upon his kind face, "the Fourth Form are to assemble on deck to witness a flogging. Please inform the rest."

"Yes, sir," said Blake dejectedly.

The word had been passed to the other Forms, also. Mr. Railton and Mr. Linton could be seen speaking in low but somewhat excited tones. Mr. Railton's brow was knitted, and the master of the Shell looked very angry. Tom Merry was in his Form, and he resented the proposed punishment very keenly. Mr. Railton was seen to leave his companion very abruptly and go below, and the onlookers guessed where he had gone.

"He's going to talk to Ratty," said Figgins. "Going to try to persuade him to have a little sense."

"He won't succeed," said Blake.

The juniors were right. Mr. Railton descended to Mr. Ratchliff's cabin and knocked at the door, and a sour voice

bade him enter. He found the New House master carefully examining a birch.

"Can I speak to you for a few minutes, Mr. Ratcliff?" said the School House master, keeping his temper well under control. "Certainly; I have a few minutes to spare. I must be on deck at half past twelve for the flogging."

"Are you determined to carry this out?"

"To carry what out?"

"This idea of flogging Merry."

"The question is rather absurd. I have assembled the Forms to witness his punishment, and I am scarcely likely to make myself look ridiculous by altering my mind upon the matter now."

"It is a very serious matter."

"I am quite aware of that. The offence Merry has committed is a serious one."

"A boyish freak—"

"I am determined to put an end to such boyish freaks on his part."

"And I must say that it was provoked."

"I am not prepared to listen to criticisms of my actions from you, Mr. Railton. I must remind you that I am senior master."

"You need not remind me of that," said Mr. Railton bitterly. "You have kept me pretty well in mind of it. But on this matter I feel I must speak out. Merry does not deserve to be flogged."

"That is not my opinion."

"Even if he did deserve that punishment, it would not be right to thus humiliate him before all the ship's company. You must remember that it is not only the boys who will witness the flogging, but the seamen and the officers of the steamer."

"That will make the lesson all the more salutary, I conceive."

"It will make the punishment more bitter and humiliating."

"It is my intention to make it so. Merry has been encouraged too long in his insolence. His audacity has gone too far. I intend to stop it, and to make a public example of him. I do not think the lower Forms will dare to enter into a contest with me again, after the public flogging of their ringleader."

"They will be in a state of mind which will certainly not make for peace. You do not know the amount of resentment you will evoke."

"I know nothing and care as little. I know what my duty is, and that I am resolved to do."

Mr. Railton bit his lip. He knew exactly how much considerations of duty affected his colleague. It was evident that his remonstrance was futile.

"Then you are determined, Mr. Ratcliff?"

"Quite determined."

"Nothing but harm can follow."

Mr. Ratcliff looked at his watch.

"I am afraid my time is up," he remarked.

"One moment," said Mr. Railton. "Have you reflected to what desperation this may drive a proud and high-spirited lad like Merry?—to what—"

"I see no reason for treating Merry differently from the other juniors," said Mr. Ratcliff. "I must go now."

"Yet a word—you know that Dr. Holmes would not approve of this."

"I know nothing of the sort."

And Mr. Ratcliff went out of the cabin. The School House master followed him slowly, with a gloomy frown upon his face. His appeal had been made in vain, and the flogging was to take place. Mr. Railton's heart was heavy as he followed the petty tyrant of the Condor on deck.

CHAPTER 13.

A Desperate Deed.

MR. RATCLIFF glanced about him with a look of satisfaction. He liked to make an impression, to make his authority felt, to have eyes fixed upon him. He was fully gratified now.

The Forms were assembled on deck, in regular order as in the hall at St. Jim's on such occasions. Not a boy was missing from his place. The masters were there with their boys, and every face was dark.

Captain Bolsover and Mr. Green were looking down from the bridge, and Mr. Thropp, the chief mate, had come from the door of the chart-house to look on. The seamen of the Condor were equally interested in what was going forward, and several hands had ceased their work for the moment. Some of the stewards had come up to look on from a distance, and there was even a grimy stoker or two to be seen.

There was a hush in the great crowd. The steamer was throbbing on over a sunlit sea, under a blue sky. The foam ran in a long wake behind her, and the black smoke drifted down the wind. Every eye was turned upon Mr. Ratcliff, and the sense of his own importance added a strut to the senior master's walk.

"Merry!"

Tom Merry was in his place in the ranks of the Shell. Lowtner and Manners were on either side of him, both looking savage and sullen. The Shell, as a matter of fact, was ripe for mutiny, though Mr. Linton was doing his best to keep silence and order, as in duty bound.

Tom Merry hesitated a moment as his name was called, and then walked out before the Form, and stood facing Mr. Ratcliff in the clear space before the assembled school.

The junior's face was pale, but there was a determined tightness about his lips, a gleam of resolution in his eyes.

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Ratcliff fixed his eyes upon the junior.

"Merry, you are to be flogged, as a punishment for the fault of which you have confessed yourself guilty. Remove your jacket."

There was a breathless hush.

Tom Merry made no motion to obey.

"Remove your jacket, Merry!"

Tom's hands were tightly clenched, and remained down at his sides. It was clear that he would not obey.

Mr. Ratcliff snapped his teeth.

"This obstinacy will serve you little, Merry. If you do not remove your jacket, it will be removed by force."

Tom's eyes met the senior master's steadily.

"You have no right to flog me," he said quietly. "Dr. Holmes would not have done so. Mr. Railton would not do so. You have no right."

"Remove your jacket instantly!" said the senior master harshly.

Tom Merry did not move.

From the Shell came a murmur, which was echoed from the Fourth Form.

"Buck up, Tom!"

Mr. Ratcliff frowned.

"Silence!"

The murmur died away, but the boys' eyes were blazing. Mr. Ratcliff signed to Knox and Sefton.

"Remove Merry's jacket," he said.

"Certainly, sir," said Knox.

The two Sixth-formers advanced towards Tom Merry. There was a distinct hiss from the whole school.

"Silence!" cried Mr. Ratcliff, with glinting eyes.

Tom Merry's eyes had a hunted look for a moment.

He had said that he would not be flogged. To be seized and held by brute force while the punishment was inflicted would be worse than if he had submitted to it from the first.

Yet, what was to be done?

He was powerless, once the grasp of the two big seniors was upon him, and he would not have a chance even to struggle.

"Keep off!" he muttered thickly. "I tell you—"

Knox and Sefton grinned, and came quickly towards him. Tom Merry gave one quick look round, and then sprang away.

There was a cry of surprise, of amazed horror.

The junior had leaped upon the rail of the steamer; he was standing with one foot on the lower rail, the other on the upper, and it seemed as if every movement of the vessel would hurl him headlong into the sea.

Knox and Sefton paused, irresolute.

"Come back," shouted Mr. Railton. "Merry, are you mad? Come back!"

"Fetch him back," muttered Mr. Ratcliff savagely.

Tom Merry stood, swaying with the motion of the steamer, on one side of him the crowded deck, on the other the deep sea.

"Keep back!" His voice rang sharp and clear now, his face, white as death, was fiercely determined. "Keep back, you cowards! Another step, and I will throw myself into the sea!"

And Knox and Sefton knew that he meant it too, and their own faces went white as they glared at him in helpless and baffled anger.

Mr. Ratcliff bit his lip savagely. He was the only one on deck who could not read aright the desperate determination in the boy's white face. To his small and mean mind it seemed all mere bluff, he was incapable of even understanding the feelings that moved the lad.

"Fetch him back!"

Mr. Railton turned upon him savagely.

"Ratcliff! Are you mad?"

"Silence!"

"Cannot you see that this is no time for obstinacy—do you wish to be responsible for that boy's death?" cried the School House master.

Mr. Ratcliff sneered.

"I am hardly likely to be deceived by this theatrical nonsense," he said acidly. "Merry certainly has no intention of throwing himself overboard."

"Look at his face, man—cannot you see—have you no eyes to see?"

"Once and for all, Mr. Railton, I refuse to be interfered with by you. Merry, I command you to return to the deck instantly."

"Not unless you promise that there shall be no flogging," said Tom Merry, between his hard, set teeth.

"Come back at once!"

"I will not!"

"Knox, bring that boy here."

The unpopular prefect would willingly have done so, but he had sense enough to see what Mr. Ratcliff was too obstinate to see. He did not move.

"Do you hear me, Knox?"

Apparently Knox did not hear, for he did not make any motion to obey, but quietly stepped back into the Sixth. Mr. Ratcliff's sallow face blazed with anger. If he gave way now his authority was at an end. To go on was worse than to give way; but he had gone too far for retreat. He hesitated for a moment, and then strode towards Tom Merry.

"Merry, descend to the deck at once."

"I will not!"

"Then I will make you."

Mr. Ratcliff sprang towards the junior. Tom Merry kept his word! Before the master's grasp could be laid upon him he leaped from the rail, and disappeared with a plunge into the deep waters!

CHAPTER 14.

Tom Merry's Peril!

THERE was a cry on the deck of the steamer—a cry of mingled grief and rage. Mr. Ratcliff stood thunder-struck.

"Man overboard!"

"Tom! Tom!" shouted Lowther, dashing to the side.

The deck was a scene of the wildest confusion. But Captain Bolsover, who had been watching the scene intently from the bridge, acted with instant promptness. His hand was already on the bridge telegraph. In an instant he had signalled to the engine-room, and the engines were reversed, and the great ship stopped in the churning water.

The seamen sprang swiftly to obey the quick, rapping orders. A boat plunged down into the water. But, ere it could be got away, three successive splashes had followed that made by Tom Merry.

Manners and Lowther, careless of everything but their chum's danger, had plunged recklessly in after him. The third splash was made by Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

At that terrible moment the swell of St. Jim's remembered how Tom Merry had plunged into a stormy sea, and risked his life to save him from drowning. And, without thinking of anything else, D'Arcy scudded to the rail and dived over. His silk hat went sailing away on the waves as he plunged into the sea. But the School House swell had forgotten that there would be a considerable difference between Tom Merry and himself in the role of rescuer. He was a poor swimmer, and more likely to need help than to render it.

Lowther and Manners reached Tom Merry almost at the same moment, and grasped him. Tom's face was white and set, and there was a feverish light in his eyes. He did not speak a word, and did not seem himself in any way.

"Help!" shouted Manners. "This way!"

The excited fellows on deck were fastening lifebelts and deck-chairs and everything that came handy into the sea. D'Arcy fortunately secured a belt, and clung to it, and looked round for Tom Merry. The boat was pulling swiftly towards the chums of the Shell, and Mr. Green seized Tom Merry and hauled him in.

"All right," he said cheerily. "Only a ducking."

Tom Merry sat where Mr. Green placed him without a movement. Lowther clambered in, and scrambled to his side at once and pressed his arm.

"Tom," he whispered. "Tom, old chap!"

Tom Merry lurched heavily against him.

"Tom!"

But Tom did not reply. He was unconscious, his face strangely white and set. Monty Lowther threw an arm round him to support him, and the boat pulled towards the steamer.

"Help! Pway help me, deah boys!"

It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy who was calling. Mr. Green and Manners gave him a hand, and he was dragged in. He sat on a thwart, dripping and shivering, the water forming a pool under him, and felt for his eyeglass.

"Is Tom Mewwy all wight, Lowthah?"

"Fainted," said Lowther shortly.

"Bai Jove!"

In a couple of minutes Tom Merry was aboard the steamer again, and Mr. Raiton carried him below. There was a general gasp of relief among his friends when they learned that his life was in no danger. Mr. Ratcliff was still on deck, so dazed and confused by what had happened that he did not know what he was saying or doing.

"Of course, that was a piece of sheer obstinacy on the boy's part, Mr. Lathom," he said.

Mr. Lathom blinked at him through his spectacles, and walked away without replying.

"Merry hoped to frighten us by this freak," said Mr. Ratcliff, addressing his next remark to Mr. Linton.

The master of the Shell turned his back. Mr. Ratcliff flushed uncomfortably, and went below. The black looks of everyone on deck began to take some effect even upon him.

"Bai Jove! If Tom Mewwy had been drowned we would have thwown that wotiah into the beasty watah aftah him!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

"We just would," said Blake, with emphasis. "But I say, Gussy, what on earth did you fall in too, for?"

"Fall in!"

"Yes. When I saw you last you were standing safe enough here, and I'm blessed if I know how you came to fall in."

D'Arcy wiped his wet eyeglass on his wetter sleeve, and screwed it into his eye.

"Weally, Blake, I pwesume you are wottin'. I leaped into the watah to wescue Tom Mewwy fwom a watowy gwave."

"My only hat!"

"He risked his life for me only the othah day," said D'Arcy, with dignity. "I felt that I could not dō less than make a weturn for it."

"You young ass! You know you can't swim in anything bigger than a bath."

"Weally, Blake——"

"You came a jolly lot nearer being drowned than Tom Merry did."

"Yaas, I dare say that is quite twue. You see, I nevah thought of that till I was in the watah."

"Just like you! Where's your silk topper?"

D'Arcy made a lugubrious grimace.

"Lost, I am afraid, Blake. That's the third toppah I've lost since we left St. Jim's. I have only one left now."

"I'd have minded it for you if you'd told me you were going to fall in."

"I didn't fall in, I jumped in. I suppose it was watah widiculous, when you come to think of it, as Tom Mewwy is a bettah swimmah than I am. But I nevah thought of that, you know."

Blake slapped him on the shoulder.

"That's all right, Gussy. You're a good little ass——"

"Weally, Blake——"

"And we're proud of you."

"Well, as a matiah of fact, you ought to be watah pwoud of me, you know. It's watah nice for you wuff wottahs to know a decent chap, who can show you how to be well-dwessed and——"

"D'Arcy, go and change your clothes immediately," said Mr. Lathom. "You will catch cold."

"Bai Jove, you know, I nevah thought of that!"

The swell of the School House suddenly paused in dismay.

"Come on," said Blake, linking his arm in D'Arcy's. "Dig and I are going to give you a rub down. We want to keep you alive if possible, though if you die of a cold we shall have you stuffed, and keep you in the study at St. Jim's——"

"Weally, deah boys, I am in a feahful flx. It's the old difficulty of the twousahs over again. I haven't a second pair to change into."

"If you'd like the steward's old trucks——"

"Oh, pway don't wot!"

"Well, you shall have my Sunday pair," said Blake, in a burst of generosity. "You ought to have something in recognition of pluck. Come on, kid, and I'll get them out."

"Weally, Blake, I wegard that as vewy decent of you."

"Not at all. Come on."

Blake and Digby hurried the School House swell below, and gave him a rub down with hard towels that threw him into a glow, and quite removed the danger of catching cold. It removed a considerable quantity of skin, too, but, as Blake remarked, that was a matter of small importance.

"Pway leave off!" gasped D'Arcy, at last. "You will wub me into pieces at this wate. I think I am all wight now."

"Right-ho!" said Blake. "But if you'd like another rub, you know, you've only got to say the word."

"I am all wight, thank you."

And the swell of St. Jim's clad himself again, feeling pretty raw all over. When the chums of the Fourth left their cabin they met Manners and Lowther, who had changed their clothes, and both looked very plum.

"Merry all right?" asked Blake at once.

"Only a little feverish, Mr. Raiton says," replied Lowther. "He's to stay in bed, and we can't speak to him. Rotten, isn't it?"

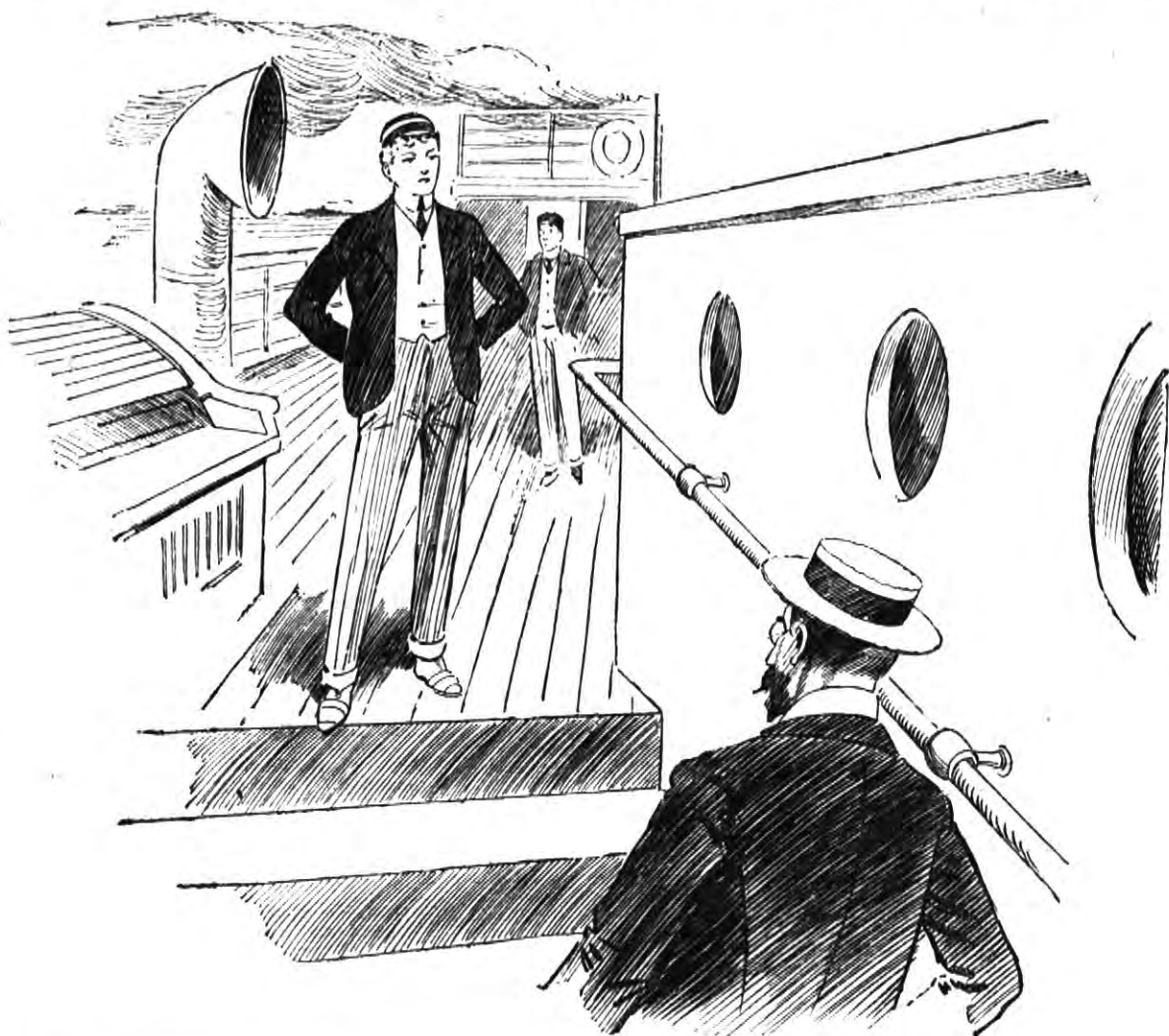
"Thank goodness it's no worse. Tom Merry must have lost his head when he did that. He might have been drowned."

"It would have been Ratty's fault," said Lowther fiercely. "If Tom had been drowned, Ratty would have been his murderer."

"Yaas, watah!"

"What is Ratty going to do now—do you know?"

Lowther shook his head.



"Do you refuse to obey me?" said Mr. Rateliff. "Yes, sir!" replied Tom Merry, defiantly.

"Nobody seems to know. But I hardly think he'll try the flogging dodge again."

"I should think not."

"Now pewsaps you chaps will admit that I was wight fwom the first," said D'Arcy. "If you had taken my advice——"

"Your advice? What advice?"

"To take possession of the steamah and turn pivatees."

"Ass!"

"I wefuse to be called an ass, Lowthah. If Tom Mewwy were not lyin' at the present moment in a fevewish condish, I should give you a feahful thwashin'!"

And D'Arcy walked away, still convinced that the best thing to do under the circumstances was to seize the steamer and turn pirates.

CHAPTER 15.

A Timely Surrender.

MR. RAILTON came out of Tom Merry's cabin with a grave face. He gave a slight start as he saw the thin figure of the senior master leaning against the wall. He stopped and looked at Mr. Rateliff.

"Were you anxious about Merry?" he asked.

"How is he?" asked Mr. Rateliff, without replying to the question.

"He is better—only a trifle feverish. He can get up later in the afternoon."

The New House master drew a deep breath.

"I suppose, as a matter of fact, there is nothing the matter with him," he said, with something of his old manner returning. Mr. Railton's eyes gleamed.

"He is in a feverish state," he said. "He was wrought up to a high pitch of excitement, and then the plunge in the cold water could not fail to have a bad effect. Thank Heaven it is no worse. You might have had his death to answer for, and you would have regretted this petty persecution then."

"Mr. Railton!"

"This is no time to mince words. You have persecuted this lad till he was driven to a state of desperation, and then he acted in a wild and wilful manner; but the fault was yours."

"I will not endure——"

"You will endure plain English," said Mr. Railton. "I cannot pretend to treat you now with the respect you do not deserve. There has very nearly been a tragedy, through your obstinacy and folly!"

Mr. Rateliff stared at the junior master in amazement. This was a new line for Mr. Railton to take.

"You seem to forget your place," he said, between his teeth. "I am master here, and I tell you that Merry shall be punished—both for his previous insolence and for this last act of his as well."

"I do not deny that Merry was wrong, and he has confessed it; but he was wrought up to such a pitch that he was not himself at the time."

"He shall be punished!"

"He shall not be punished!"

"What?" said Mr. Ratcliff, hardly able to believe his ears. "What are you saying?"

"You heard what I said. He shall not be punished. There has been enough of that," said the School House master grimly.

"Do you dispute my authority?"

"Yes, if necessary. Merry shall not be punished. If you persist in this course, you will be treated with the contempt you deserve."

"What!"

"Keep your place, and your authority will be respected by me and by my colleagues," said Mr. Railton quietly. "I have no desire to cause trouble, or to depart from the instructions given by Dr. Holmes. But any further persecution of an innocent lad I will not allow!"

"You—you will not allow!" stammered the other.

"That is the word. I will not allow it. Think for a moment. You have made yourself detested by all boys and masters alike," said Mr. Railton, with merciless frankness. "If I choso to wrest authority from your hands, I should be obeyed, and you would not be obeyed. You know it!"

"I—I—I—"

"I shall not do so, unless you drive me to it. I have no desire to bring authority into contempt—to set an example of insubordination to the boys, who ought to see nothing but concord among their masters. I shall carefully refrain from opposing you, if you choose to take a sensible view of the matter. But I tell you plainly that this persecution of Merry is to go no further."

"You threaten me?"

Mr. Railton nodded calmly.

"Yes, I threaten you."

The senior master looked for a moment as if he would strike the younger man; but some lingering spark of prudence restrained him.

"If you threaten me with a mutiny in the school," he said thickly; "if you hold over me a revolt of the boys, headed by yourself, I acknowledge that I am in your hands!"

Mr. Railton smiled contemptuously.

"I hold over you nothing of the sort. I simply state that you are holding your authority merely on sufferance, and that if you force me to it, I shall take it out of your hands."

"I quite understand. I have no choice but to submit to your terms."

"So I imagine."

"But trust me," said Mr. Ratcliff, his voice trembling with passion, "trust me, Dr. Holmes shall hear of this—you will be compelled to leave St. Jim's!"

"I am quite willing for the matter to be taken before the Head, when the Condor returns home, if you choose," said the School House master, calmly. "I think I shall be able to justify myself. For the present, then, it is to be understood that this affair ends here and now, and that there is to be no further question of any punishment for Merry."

Mr. Ratcliff could not reply for a moment. His anger choked him, and mastered his speech.

"What is your answer—yes or no?"

"Yes," muttered the senior master.

"Very well."

And they parted. Mr. Railton went on deck. There the excitement had by no means subsided; in fact, it was on the increase. It was near time for afternoon lessons, but no one showed any intention of repairing to the class-rooms. Seniors of the Fifth and Sixth looked almost as excited as the juniors. Blake & Co. were discussing the situation in raised tones as the School House master came up, and they did not see him in their excitement.

"This is the finish, anyway," Blake was saying. "If Ratty keeps up this game, we're going to back up Tom Merry."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Are you all game to stand by him?" exclaimed Monty Lowther eagerly. "If we all stand together, Ratty can do nothing. The Sixth are just as much disgusted with the rotter as we are, and they wouldn't help him."

"He wouldn't find more than a few rotters like Knox to stand by him," said Manners; "and we don't care for Knox. If we stand shoulder to shoulder, Ratty will have to give in."

"Bai Jove, that's my ideal, you know. We can't allow Tom Merry to be thwashed, you know—it would be infwa dig. My ideal is to muzzle Watty."

"We're all in it," said Figgins grimly. "If Tom Merry isn't pardoned, we all stand by him, and back him up against Ratty. He sha'n't be flogged."

"Never!"

"Britons never shall be slaves!"

"Bai Jove, wathah not!"

"Ahem!"

The juniors looked round in some dismay as Mr. Railton coughed. Blake coloured, but he was looking determined. The juniors of St. Jim's were in deadly earnest, and all parties were united firmly on that point—that Tom Merry should be backed up, to any necessary extent, against the senior master.

"I have something to tell you, my lads," said Mr. Railton quietly. "Mr. Ratcliff has decided to pardon Merry."

The juniors looked rather blank. All that they had been prepared to desperately contend for was granted unasked, and the vision of a mutiny of juniors faded away.

"The matter will be allowed to drop, under the circumstances," said Mr. Railton, "and the least said is the soonest mended. You will get ready for afternoon school."

"Yes, sir," said the juniors together, respectfully enough.

The news spread along the deck, and there was a general clearing of faces and unknitting of brows. Ratty had done the only sensible thing, as Kildare put it; but he, and many others, suspected that Mr. Ratcliff would not have acted so sensibly had not pressure been brought to bear upon him. Blake & Co. took the same view.

"It's Railton who's managed it," Blake said confidently. "Ratty wouldn't have had sense enough to give in till we were ragging him bald-headed. Railton has put on the screw somehow—good luck to him. I suppose we can consider this a victory."

"Yaas, wathah."

"Anyway, Tom's all right," said Lowther, "and that's the great point."

Tom Merry did not appear again till tea. He was looking rather pale as he took his place at the table with the rest of the Shell, and unusually quiet. The crisis he had gone through had left its traces upon him, traces that would probably remain for some days. When tea was over, the hero of the Shell was escorted on deck by a troop of cheering juniors.

Mr. Ratcliff, in his cabin, heard the shouts from the deck.

"Hurrah for Tom Merry!"

He snapped his teeth as he heard it. But he could do nothing else—nothing but listen with a black brow to the cheering. No one cared for his anger now, and Tom Merry was the hero of the school on the steamer.

THE END.

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SPLENDID NEW TALE OF CIRCUS LIFE.

JOE

BY

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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 ruin him. This he endeavours to do by dashing his traction-engine into Rubby's caravans, which are, however, saved by Joe's presence of mind. One day Joe's guardian, Silas Read, who treated Joe with great cruelty before he joined Ruabino, turns up at the circus and claims his ward.

Ruabino refuses to give him up, but with the help of Giles, Read kidnaps Joe. The latter, however, manages to effect his escape. Owing to Muerte's having tampered with his apparatus, Joe narrowly escapes death while performing in the circus. Rubby, Jupiter, and Joe consequently visit Muerte's caravan, and Jupiter thrashes the miscreant. A circus-hand, hearing the noise, summons a policeman to Muerte's aid. The latter, however, guilty as he is, does not welcome investigation, and endeavours to get rid of the constable.

(Now go on with the story.)

Trouble with the Man in Blue.

"Are you going, or do you want me to fling you out?" growled Muerte.

"I'd like to see you try it on, mate," retorted the policeman. "It wouldn't go well with you if you did."

"Well, go, you pudden-headed brute!"

"I shall run you in if you get misallancing me," declared the constable. "You ain't got the right to riot in this manner."

"You are off your horse, bobby!" exclaimed Joe. "Muerte has a perfect right to allow any man to thrash him in his own house, if he likes it."

"How do you suppose he is going to like to be flogged like that?"

"I don't know; but he has told you that he is not going to give us in charge, and that looks remarkably as though he does not bear us malice. In fact, he seems to be more vexed with you than with us."

"Would you like to give Muerte into custody, sir?" said the constable, turning to Rubby, and becoming far more civil to the little showman.

"I refer you to my legal adviser," observed Rubby, pointing with his cigar at Joe.

"No," exclaimed Joe, "Rubby would not like to give him in custody! He doesn't like the police, and so has punished the man without their assistance! Now, go, old chap, because you are not wanted here, and as I have already told you, you will not get a case against us."

"I want to know what that man has done?" growled the constable.

"Then you are not going to know," retorted Joe. "It is not at all likely that Muerte will tell you. Neither shall I!"

"Who are you, I would like to know?"

"The representative of the greatest showman on earth—Ruabino by name. That's his name, not mine. My name is Joe, if that interests you in any way. Rubby, that's the

short for Ruabino, that gentleman sitting there, won't tell you a word, because I shall advise him not to do so."

"Are you willing to tell me what he has done, sir?" inquired the constable, turning to Rubby.

"I refer you to my legal adviser," answered Rubby.

"Bust it!" growled the constable. "What has he done, my lad?"

"I have frequently noticed," observed Joe, looking very serious, and slightly winking at Rubby, "that when you want a bobby you can't find him. He's certain to be looking for burglars in some kitchen where they make pies; but when you don't want a bobby, they crop up as plentifully as the proverbial blackberries. They are the most difficult things in the world to get, and just as difficult to get rid of. Boy in blue, avaunt! We need you not. Muerte has admittedly received a thrashing, and if you ask him he will tell you that he thoroughly well deserved it."

"What caused the thrashing?" demanded the constable.

"A cough, my dear fellow," answered Joe. "Rubby had a nasty cough, and if you put two and two together, you will be able to deduct the inference."

"I don't understand you."

"I can quite believe that, constable. I should quite as soon expect a dead donkey to understand my meaning as you; but you have the consolation of knowing that you will go through life not understanding a good many things. Don't you work that brain of yours too hard. Manual labour is more your mark, and it would put you into better form to appreciate the beauties of cooky and her cooking."

"I'll tell you what it is, young shaver," cried the constable, looking very angry. "I'll run you in if you are not careful!"

"You can't, bobby. You have not got the power. You see, I am only giving you good advice, and, although it may be illegal to punch a bobby's head, it is not so to give him good advice. Now, you run off home; at least, I wouldn't run too much. You are rather too fat for running purposes, and it would be a pity if you ran yourself into a huge grease spot."

"I jest ask you," cried the indignant constable, turning towards Rubby. "What do you think of this?"

"I refer you to my legal adviser," answered the exasperated Rubby.

"Ain't you got any ideas of your own, but what you must let that boy answer for you?"

"I refer you to my legal adviser."

"Yes. Rubby has some very brilliant ideas," said Joe.

"You must know that he is a very clever man, otherwise he would never have employed me at a fixed, though somewhat meagre, screw. You see, I am of the greatest help to him, because, when he gets into a difficulty with a bobby, or anything like that, he refers them to me, and I generally get him into a worse difficulty. But that does not matter a bit on the present occasion, because we have Jupiter here. Now, Jupiter is our strong man. He can lift pianos with his teeth, or throw bobbies over brick walls. Bless your bones, if Rubby were to say to Jupiter, 'Throw that bobby out,' you would be out of this place before you had had time to give a last thought to cooky and her pies. Rubby likes to do things by proxy, especially if there is any work attached to the task. Jupiter loves work, when someone else is doing it. I, myself, am so fond of it that I am seriously contemplating enlisting in the Force, so that the remainder of my days may be passed in peace and plenty. I believe peace and plenty is the bobbies' motto, and I must confess that it is a most appropriate one for them, for they invariably get both."

"Let this foolery cease," snarled Muerte. "Leave this caravan at once, constable, and you other three do the same."

"We will, dear boy," exclaimed Rubby, although he showed no signs of doing so. "I trust that our call has proved pleasant and beneficial to you, and would like to intimate to you that if there should be a recurrence of the cause a similar effect will follow. The little castigation that you have received has been given with a view to reforming you. I admit the punishment has been absurdly light for such a crime—"

"What crime?" inquired the constable eagerly.

"I refer you to my legal adviser," said Rubby.

"I don't believe the man is in his sound senses," growled the constable.

"Man of law!" exclaimed Joe. "That is a gross libel, and one for which you must be prosecuted. You have no right to call Rubby, the great and only Ruabino, a raving maniac!"

"I never said he was."

"Silence, man! How dare you interrupt me when I am speaking! However mad Rubby may be, you have no right to assert that he is a lunatic in public, as you have done! We all know that the greater the truth the greater the libel is a profound adage. It is beating a cripple with his own crutches. Rubby cannot help being a little mad. It is his misfortune, and not his fault, and—"

"Here, that will do," growled Rubby. "I give you a month's notice!"

"Which shows how hopelessly mad you must be, my poor old Rubby. But never mind that, you are not the only lunatic in this world, and I won't allow the bobby to tell you of your affliction in public."

"Why, he's checking his employer, now!" gasped the constable.

Rubby sighed, withdrew half a crown from his pocket, went up to the constable, and slipped it into his hand, while he murmured in his ear:

"He would check the Emperor of Germany, but he's a most remarkable lad. Are you off duty to-night?"

"Yes, sir, thanky."

"Then come to my circus, and bring your wife and family," said Rubby, scribbling on a card. "Present that, and you will get free admission to the best seats. You will see Joe perform, and if it does not make your hair stand on end, I'm downright certain it will make mine. He's the most daring young rascal I ever came across, and the way he fools about with the lions is a caution."

"You are very kind, sir. I've got four children. May I bring them all?"

"Certainly. The more the merrier."

"Well, I find four quite merry enough."

"Pooh! Dear boy, that's nothing. Wait till you get fourteen, then you will know what the cares of a family are like, especially if your wife takes to nagging."

The constable left the caravan with a sigh, and went away with the impression that Rubby was the husband of a nagging wife, and the father of fourteen children.

"Speak to Muerte, Joe," said Rubby. "I have no patience to deal with the fellow."

"Muerte!" exclaimed Joe, fixing his eyes on the Spaniard. "My employer instructs me to point out the error of your ways. You have been guilty of a very vile crime, and the punishment you have received is, no doubt, quite inadequate. I do not speak like this because I was the intended victim of your crime. You were not certain that I was going up, but this did not matter to you. In order that you might have vengeance on me, you were content to risk taking anyone's life. Now, you ought to be able to see that if I had met my death, as you fully intended, or even if I had been maimed, which, perhaps, would have suited your evil purpose as well, there would have been the strictest inquiry into the matter. Rubby would have seen to that, I know. Very well, suspicion would have rested on you, because there is no other man who would have committed such a vile action. No man, in fact, would have wanted to have vengeance on me. The least that could have happened to you, on your guilt being proved, would have been a long term of imprisonment. Had I met my death, you would probably have been hanged, and I do not think there is anyone who would have had pity on you, knowing all the facts of the case. You were too cowardly to take your vengeance openly, but came sneaking round the circus in the night. I think I may say, in Rubby's name, that should you attempt any similar action, you will be far more severely punished. You are a guilty wretch!"

"It is a lie!" cried Muerte, although he certainly looked ashamed of himself. "A gross lie!"

"It is," answered Joe. "A gross lie on your part; but that is only what might have been expected from such a man as you are. A man! Well, you are not a man! You are a contemptible coward! It is to be hoped that the

thrashing you have received will do you some good, although I have my doubts on that point. Shall we go, Rubby? It is useless to waste words on such a man. The only way to appeal to his feelings is with a horsewhip, and even that is scarcely likely to alter his vile nature. Some wild beasts cannot be trained. Muerte is like one of those, and it is my impression that his crimes will cease when the hangman has ended his career."

Then the three left the caravan, and Muerte groaned, as he seated himself in his chair.

"I will have vengeance for this," he muttered. "A terrible vengeance. How did that young demon discover my plot? He could not have seen me, that is certain. Did I drop anything when I fell over that rope. Perdition! I have failed this time, but my time will come yet. I will ruin that calm-faced Ruabino. Cost me what it may, I will ruin him! I shall live to see him in poverty, and then I will mock him in his misery, and let him know that I have been the cause of it. He thinks to mock me, now, and insult me in every possible manner, but the man who plays that game with me is in a dangerous position. And that demon Jupiter. Ah, he shall suffer, yet! I will make him suffer ten times more than he has made me. Once I get him in my power, and I will surely do so, I will lash him till he howls for mercy; but he shall have none from me. It will be good to get him in my power, and it can be done. I can bide my time, but if I have to wait for years, I will never forgive the pain he has caused me to suffer. Perdition! My back feels as though it were on fire. Ah! There is one way to gain vengeance. Why did I not think of that before? I will have it. If it costs me my life, I will, and it will cost nothing of the sort."

And, with these amiable thoughts in his evil brain, he slowly left the caravan, groaning a little as he went, for the flogging Jupiter had given him had been very severe.

Muerte's Revenge.

The performance for the evening was over, and the spectators, of whom there were large numbers, had all left. Joe had made the ascent on the globe up the spiral platform, and, from the spectators' point of view, there had been no hitch; but, since his fall, he had felt a nervousness that he was determined to conquer, and so he made the ascent once more, and if Rubby had seen the way he worked that ball about with his feet, he would have had good cause to feel nervous.

But Joe was the sort of lad who, having once undertaken a task, was determined to excel in it, and he knew that it was only by long practice that he would conquer his nervousness.

Now, in the usual course of events, Joe would have been in Rubby's caravan preparing supper for the little showman, who always liked a good meal the last thing at night.

He had been giving the men some instructions, which took him half an hour or so, and when he entered his caravan he fully expected to find a hot supper awaiting him; but neither the supper nor Joe was there.

"Now, where has the young rascal got to?" growled Rubby. "He is generally so punctual with supper, because he knows that if I don't invite him to it he will invite himself. He ought to be here. I really don't know what boys are coming to. When I was a youngster, I should have had a thrashing for being late. Expect I shall have to go to find him."

Rubby went out grumbling. As he passed the booth, where his employees were having supper, he could hear them laughing and talking, and Rubby smiled, for he liked the people about him to be happy. Then he went on towards the large circus.

The night was very dark, but towards the other side of the circus Rubby saw a light; and this made him savage, for he at once guessed what it meant.

He kept a cask of petroleum for the use of the circus, but he had given all employed by him the strictest orders that none of it was to be drawn off at night, under any circumstances. Rubby always bought the best paraffin, not being a believer in low-flash oil; but he knew that there was considerable danger in taking a light near it, thus his strict injunctions.

"Silly rascals!" he muttered. "They are always running short of oil, and they won't obey me a bit, but I'll make an example of that ruffian if I can only catch him."

Rubby stole towards the spot, but ere he reached it a flash of yellow flame shot up, and he saw a form dart across the circus, and scaling the surrounding fence, disappear in the darkness.

Rubby sprang forwards, and then he realised how serious the matter was.

The large tap to the cask had been turned full on, and the paraffin had streamed beneath the canvas of the circus, where it had flowed amongst a quantity of sawdust, with the

consequence that directly it was ignited the flames spread with fearful rapidity.

Already the canvas of the circus was in flames, and a glance around convinced Rubby that the place was doomed.

That was bad enough, but worse was to follow, for he heard a cry for help, and he recognised Joe's voice.

Rubby sprang into the burning circus, and then he saw a scene that made his heart leap.

Joe was on the globe at the very top of the spiral platform, which was a mass of flames at the bottom, while the fumes from the paraffin were filling the place with dense clouds of smoke.

On this the lurid glow of the fire was flickering, lighting up the whole place.

Joe sprang off the globe on to the little platform at the top, and the great ball fell into the flames, and there he stood completely cut off from all hope of life.

Each moment the flames were spreading, and they had already got such a hold of the spiral platform that Rubby expected to see it come crashing down, in which case Joe must have inevitably met a terrible death, for even had he not been killed by the fall, no one could have rescued him from the raging fire beneath.

There was scarcely time for thought; but there was one thought that flashed through the little showman's brain, namely, that Joe had risked his life to save his, and had saved it.

"Good-bye, Rubby!" gasped Joe, who was nearly suffocated with the smoke and heat. "You have been a true friend to me. I am doomed. Save yourself."

"Like you did when I was knocked senseless into the river," cried Rubby, whose face had turned deathly white, for he believed that Joe had spoken the truth when he said he was doomed. "Boy, do you think that I will leave you to be burnt to death? If so, you do not know me."

"Rubby, go! You will meet your death, and it is impossible to save me."

"I will either do so, boy, or I will die with you, as you would have died with me."

Rubby's brain had been working quickly as he uttered the few words. He knew that it would be impossible to bring aid in time, nor did he see what aid he could bring. He had to rely on himself, and as the flames came licking round him, he sprang to the high trapeze, from which the ascending rope hung, just as Leo had left it after his performance.

Now, Rubby had been an acrobat in his time, but that was years ago, and a life of comparative ease and plenty of good food had caused him to put on flesh. He was stout. Muerte, his rival, would have called him fat; but stout though he undoubtedly was, his early training had hardened his muscles, and given him a strength greater than that of an ordinary man. Now terror for the helpless lad lent Rubby activity.

Grasping the rope, he ascended hand over hand until he was nearly as high as the trapeze, then twining his arm round the rope while he grasped it higher up with his left hand, he swung himself to and fro, higher and higher, until as he swung forwards he nearly reached the platform on which Joe stood.

"Next time, Joe!" he shouted. "Jump straight at me. I will catch you. Ready!"

Joe prepared to take the fearful leap which would mean either life or death to him.

Once more Rubby swung forward.

"Go!" he shouted; and Joe sprang.

His body struck against his brave rescuer, and the next instant Rubby's left arm gripped him round the body.

"Clutch me round the neck!" cried Rubby; and Joe promptly obeyed. Then the little showman gripped the rope with his other hand, and worked his way downwards until they reached the tan at a part where the flames had not yet caught it, and together they rushed from the burning circus.

The alarm had now been given, and presently a fire-engine came upon the scene, but before they got the water playing on the conflagration the circus was a complete wreck.

Fortunately the wind was blowing from the part where the animals were kept, and both Rubby and Joe hurried in that direction to get them into a place of safety, as soon as they had assured themselves that all the employees were safe.

The cask of petroleum was now blazing up fiercely, and it soon burst, scattering fire in all directions.

The water that the firemen poured on the blazing mass did very little good, and it was quite impossible for them to prevent the flames from spreading to the whole of the booths.

"Well, Joe," exclaimed Rubby, when they had been toiling half through the night, "we have saved the poor beasts,

and that is the principal thing. It would have been terrible had they been burnt."

"So it would, Rubby; and you saved me."

"Pooh! I will class you with the other beasts. Who cares for you?"

"I know one brave man who does."

"The silly villain can't have any taste, then."

"Everything else is lost, Rubby!"

"Yes. Still, I am thankful that no lives were lost. It might have been terribly worse. A showman has a great many responsibilities, but I am thankful to say no life has been sacrificed in my circus. Now, Joe, all we have to do is to wait till the morning. Morning dawn on the darkest night, you know. This was an act of incendiarism, Joe. I saw the miscreant start the fire at the petroleum cask, and I believe his object was to take your life. He must have known that you were in the circus. You were practising, I presume?"

"Yes."

"Well, he knew that."

"Muerte is the only man who would have done such a thing."

"Exactly; but I could not recognise him in the darkness. He made his escape over the fence. I am just as certain as you are that it was Muerte, though I shall never be able to bring the horrible crime home to him. I could not swear that he was the man. It may have been an accomplice of his."

"What about the three hundred pounds I drew from the bank for you yesterday. The money was in notes."

"It is now in ashes, dear boy. I left it in my caravan, and the ironwork of the caravan is all that remains. Joe, the curtain has been rung down on the last scene."

"Don't say that, Rubby."

"It's a fact, all the same. Muerte swore to ruin me. He has succeeded."

"Were you insured?"

"Not for one penny piece. The rates are almost prohibitive for a show like mine; then I have always considered that in case of fire there would be loss of life, and so I have taken every precaution."

"That petroleum should not have been so close to the circus."

"I know; but, you see, we were cramped for room, and it was as safe there as anywhere else, when my orders that no one should go near with a light were obeyed. That was not the risk, Joe. No one can guard against an incendiary. It would have been a simple matter to roll the cask to the spot."

"Shall you take any steps concerning Muerte?"

"I cannot. I did not recognise him at all. I could only swear that someone set fire to the place purposely, and I should not be justified in accusing any man. No, there is nothing to be done. However, the worst has not happened. My loss is heavy. It spells ruin, Joe—absolute ruin, as you shall presently learn, but no lives were lost, and I am deeply thankful that such is the case. It would have been as death to me had you or anyone else met their death."

Then the good-hearted little showman lighted a cigar, and was very silent for the rest of the night, as he paced to and fro with Joe.

Joe thought it better to ask no questions, but it made him feel sad to see how the little showman tried to be cheerful.

As day broke it commenced to rain, and the company were in a truly miserable plight. Rubby ordered the animals to be fed, and then he took his party to the inn, and ordered breakfast for them, while he went into a small private room with Joe, where they had their own breakfast.

"You see, Joe," exclaimed Rubby, "I don't want to be questioned by them at present. I shall do the best I can for them. I have telegraphed to London to a certain man who will be down here presently, and then I shall know the worst or the best; but there is little best with him, I fear. I may tell you that he is a moneylender. His name is Prowall, and his nature is keen. I borrowed three hundred pounds from him, and gave him a bill of sale on my stock. Had to do it, for I was on my beam ends. He is certain to be down this morning. The three hundred pounds you drew for me yesterday, and which was burnt, was to pay him off. I had paid him a lot, but he called that interest, and to get out of his clutches I determined to draw nearly all I had in the bank and pay him off. I have enough for the wages left, and that is about all. Now get on with your breakfast. We can decide on nothing till we have seen Prowall; and as this breakfast will have to be paid for, we may as well eat it."

Then Rubby chatted about all sorts of things, and neither by his manner nor his face could anyone have told how great the calamity that had befallen him was.

At a little after eleven Prowall was shown into the room. He was a spare man, with keen, grey eyes, and very high-

bridged nose, which he had a habit of twisting from side to side something like a rabbit does, though in other respects his face more resembled a fox's.

"Sit down, dear boy!" exclaimed Rubby. "That you got my wire I know, otherwise you would not have been here."

"My time is short, and—"

"Quite so. I know you are always in a hurry. Have a cigar?"

"I don't smoke."

"Glad to hear it, dear boy, because I have only three of these cigars left, and they are good ones."

"You owe me three hundred pounds, with interest."

"I refer you to my legal adviser," said Rubby, waving his cigar towards Joe. "The facts of the case are that I borrowed three hundred from you; got two hundred and fifty. Gave a bill of sale for three hundred, and have paid back, say, a hundred, which has been claimed for interest. Now, fire ahead, Joe!"

"I say, Rubby," exclaimed Joe, "you had really better arrange this matter yourself."

"Pooh! You will do it quite well enough. There is no arrangement to be made. I will be bound by all you do. Come, Prowall, there is a chance for you! Make what arrangement that lad will agree to, and I will confirm it. You are bound to get the best of the bargain with a boy, but no matter. Tell him all you know, Joe."

"Well, shall we try to make an arrangement, Mr. Prowall?" inquired Joe.

"Can Ruabino pay me the three hundred pounds?"

"No. He drew the money last night, and the notes were burnt. The bank will know their numbers. We can go there to confirm my statement."

"No good. You have not so much as the ashes of the notes, I suppose?"

"No. The firemen played on the caravan, which is a heap of wet ashes. Would the ashes have been of any use?"

"They might have been; provided the Bank of England people were satisfied that the notes were there, they would have paid. I have known a case where it has been done. But, you see, they would naturally think it was a plant, the same as I should, unless the bank told me the money had been drawn; and even then I should think Ruabino had got it in his pocket. Well, he hasn't. The question is, how much can he pay me?"

"Nothing, unless you like to find the money for him to start another circus."

"Well, that's too improbable to discuss. What was saved?"

"The animals."

"Well, I shall take them. They will be worth three hundred pounds."

"To Rubby, not to you. A circus horse is of no use for anything else. You couldn't sell them straight away."

"I shall take them. I have a bill of sale."

"I doubt if you could sell the whole lot for a hundred and fifty pounds, and that would give you back your money without interest. Now, I tell you what Rubby will do, Mr. Prowall. You know that he is an honourable man, and would have paid you in full had he been able to do so. He will still pay you, as soon as he can."

"Thank you for nothing. I shall take all that is left. It is a scandalous thing that you can only imprison for debt for a fortnight; at least, contempt of court they call it, but it is the same thing. In the good old times, you could keep a man in prison till he died, and that is how it ought to be now. It would be some consolation to me to know that Ruabino was in prison. I daresay he set fire—No matter."

"Set fire to what?" inquired Joe.

"His cigar, my lad, his cigar. The man who catches Jabez Prowall must be smart. A boy won't do so! I have never had an action for libel against me, yet, and don't want one. They don't pay."

"Have you any arrangement to suggest?" inquired Joe.

"None, unless you can pay me in full."

"Rubby can't do that, but you have got to consider that he is not the sort of man to let things drift. He will be in full working order before so long, say, before three months. Now, naturally, he will require the animals, and if you sold them for, say, a hundred and fifty pounds, or possibly less, you would be at a loss. Rubby will agree to cancel the bill of sale on these conditions. He will sign a promissory note for four hundred pounds, and let you hold the whole of his property as security. Under those conditions, a promissory note is as good to you as a bill of sale, better in fact, because his property will be in your hands, and, before he can redeem it, he will have to pay you four hundred pounds."

"Do you agree to that, Ruabino?" exclaimed Prowall, in surprise.

"Why, I pledged my word, and will stick to it, but I must say I don't see how I get any benefit. However, I leave the matter to my legal adviser. Yes, I agree to it."

"We have an inventory of the animals here," said Joe.

"I will just write the arrangement on it. You can sign it, Mr. Prowall, and you can make out the bill for four hundred pounds. Shall I send for a form?"

"No. I have plenty in my pocket."

"Have you the bill of sale?" inquired Joe, scribbling away.

"Yes."

"That must be cancelled, of course?"

"Certainly. When I have the promissory note, and possession of the property."

"Yes. That is all agreed. See, it is stated there. All fair, I think?"

"Quite so! You are a smart lad. Are you seeking a situation?"

"Well, I may be later on. Let's settle this matter first. Sign the promissory note, Rubby. You sign that other paper, Mr. Prowall."

Prowall waited till the note was in his possession, and then he signed the paper, of which Joe took possession.

"All settled comfortably and fairly?" observed Joe.

"You have three months in which to redeem the animals, Rubby. During that time they remain in Mr. Prowall's possession. If you find the four hundred pounds, he must hand you all those animals in like good condition. He has agreed to that, and signed it."

"But, dear boy," gasped Rubby. "Who is going to pay for their keep?"

"Prowall, naturally!"

"Gadzooks! Look at the horses, and—"

"He can turn them out to grass, and—"

"He can't turn lions out to grass, and I don't see how he is going to turn out the elephant. Why, dear boy, they cost nearly twenty pounds a week to keep," exclaimed Rubby.

"Well, there will be thirteen weeks in the three months," said Joe calmly. "Let's work that out! Yes. That comes to, say, eighteen pounds a week. Thirteen times eighteen make two hundred and thirty-four pounds. Well, you really owe him a hundred and fifty pounds, with what you have paid back taken into consideration, and without interest. Now, if you add those two amounts together, you will find that it makes three hundred and eighty-four pounds, and as you have signed for four hundred he gets sixteen pounds to the good, which will be jolly good interest, after counting the cost of moving the stock to his own place. I'll just write 'cancelled by promissory note for four hundred pounds' across the bill of sale, so, then, all Prowall will have to do is to take it off the register. We will see that he does that."

Prowall was simply speechless, and Joe had scrawled the words across the bill of sale before he realised what was happening.

"Why, you infamous young thief," he howled, glaring at the calm-looking Joe. "Do you think that I will allow a boy to rob me?"

"Rob you? Nonsense, my dear fellow! You get sixteen pounds interest for your money and moving the animals. Now, say that costs you a sovereign. It ought not to cost more. Well, Rubby really only owes you a hundred and fifty pounds, so that fifteen pounds on that represents 10 per cent. for three months, or 40 per cent. per annum, and that is splendid interest, seeing that you have security."

Prowall did not regard it in this light at all. He knew little or nothing about animals, and, strange to say, he had overlooked the cost of their keep. He had not the slightest idea what a serious item it was.

"I will agree to nothing of the sort!" he cried. "I tell you, Ruabino, it is a fraud."

"Dear boy, my legal adviser says that it is perfectly fair," answered Rubby cheerfully. "I must say that I considered he was landing me with too much when he said four hundred pounds, but the way he works it out appears to be quite right. It sounded to me as though I were going to lose heavily over the matter, but, in reality, you will get your money back and sixteen pounds for interest and expenses."

"Perdition! Suppose you don't pay me the four hundred at the end of three months?"

"In that case you will have to sell the animals. I hope I shall be able to get the money, somehow, though I must confess I do not know how. It is another matter that I think I shall have to refer to my legal adviser. Smart lad, isn't he, dear boy? Ha, ha, ha! Joe is a capital one at driving a bargain or getting out of a difficulty."

"He has rogued me!" howled Prowall.

"Dear boy, you agreed to everything."

"I won't pay for the keep of the animals!"

"I refer you to my legal adviser."

"You must pay for them," said Joe. "You have signed that you will keep them for three months as security, and hand them over in the same condition."

"I haven't said that I will feed them!"

"Keep them means feeding them. Besides, how could you hand them over in the same condition, if you did not

feed them? No, the matter is all settled, and I feel perfectly satisfied. If Rubby feels the same, that is all I care for. And look here, Prowall, you say your time is short. So is ours. Good morning."

"I won't submit to this!" hooted the angry man. "You ought to have told me what the animals cost to keep!"

"My legal adviser evidently thought otherwise. You signed the thing with your eyes open, and, now, you will have to abide by what you have agreed to."

"You will have to find at least a hundred pounds."

"Dear boy, where do you think I shall find them? I will go and look at once, for, to tell you the truth, a hundred pounds will come in remarkably convenient just now. During the course of my career, I have frequently been in want of a hundred pounds, although I can never remember an instance when they would have been more acceptable than now."

"I feel sure, Ruabino, that your sense of justice will not allow me to be swindled like this."

"Dear boy, there is no swindle in the matter. You make sixteen pounds clear profit, and surely that ought to be enough for interest, seeing that you hold security. Ha, ha, ha! I must confess that your security will be rather expensive to keep; but, on the other hand, if you had got four hundred pounds out of me, it would have been a swindle on your part. You were quite satisfied with my legal adviser's suggestion, and, therefore, you will be compelled to abide by your bargain."

"Bargain be hanged! A pretty bargain it is for me."

"Then why did you agree to it?"

"I did not take into consideration the cost of keeping the animals."

"Then you must have been very silly, because you knew perfectly well that the animals would require feeding. The only thing that you can do, now, as far as I can see, is to request my legal adviser to rescind the contract, and, of course, if he considers it is to my interest that he should do so, he will not hesitate to do so."

"No, Rubby!" exclaimed Joe, looking very serious. "I am perfectly well satisfied with the contract, and cannot give my consent to have it altered in any way. The interest is certainly liberal, but I do not consider that it is excessive. Prowall, dear fellow, if you are not perfectly satisfied, it will be a lesson to you, in future, to consider every point of a contract before you sign it. For the rest, all you have to do is to make arrangements to remove the animals. Otherwise, the promissory note will become null. We shall get this paper stamped, and hold you to your undertaking. Now, if you wish to ask me any further questions, I shall be pleased to answer them, but I must ask you to bear in mind that our time is extremely short."

"Why, I should have to employ a man to look after the animals!"

"Dear boy!" exclaimed Rubby. "I have a man whom I can thoroughly recommend, and, if you like, he would enter into a contract with you for the animals' keep. The man's name is Jupiter, and I feel sure you would save money by employing him. You could either hand him a lump sum, or make arrangements to pay him so much a week. I have full confidence in him, and feel certain that you will save a very considerable sum of money by employing him."

Prowall was too angry to listen to this at first; but, finding he could not induce Rubby to alter the arrangement in any way, he asked to see Jupiter, who agreed to attend to the animals, and feed them for twelve pounds a week, provided Prowall gave him the grazing of a two-acre field, and, as Prowall had such a field at his disposal, he thought it advisable to enter into the arrangement, at any rate, for the present.

This took a weight off Rubby's mind, for he knew that Jupiter would rather go hungry himself than allow the animals to do so, and, having got rid of Prowall, the little showman had a harder task in getting rid of his company, and tears were in his eyes when he bade them farewell, while Vera wept outright, and wanted to lend Rubby all the money she had saved, which was a considerable sum.

"Speak to them, Joe!" said Rubby, sitting down. "I haven't the heart. Tell them how sorry I am! I feel too sad for words."

"Comrades!" cried Joe. "I feel that I am the cause of this calamity. I believe that a villainous attempt was made on my life, and the man who made it will be only too glad that he has brought temporary ruin on his rival. I cannot mention the name of the man whom we suspect, but if we are correct, then you may be certain that retribution is in store for him. Now, Rubby has come a cropper through no fault of his own. For the present we must part, but Rubby will give you a certain address where you can communicate with him, and, if, within three months, he is able to start the circus again, then he will take you all on. Is that right, Rubby?"

"It is, boy. Perfectly right. I only trust for their sakes,

as well as for my own, that I may be able to do so; but in common fairness, I must confess that I do not know how it is to be done."

"Neither do I," said Joe; "but it will be done. Of that I feel sure. Cheer up, Rubby, and within three months you will rise on the ashes of your own pyre. Three cheers for Ruabino! Three cheers for good, old Rubby, and may he never need a friend while we live!"

Then Rubby got those cheers, and the company all declared that he never should want such a friend.

Rubby behaved as liberally as he possibly could. That is to say, he distributed all the money he had in the world amongst his employees, then took his leave of all with a hearty handshake, while Vera kissed him before all the company, and declared that he was an old darling.

"Now, Joe!" exclaimed Rubby. "The question is, what are you going to do? You say you will meet Jim and Leo in London later on?"

"That's it, Rubby," exclaimed Joe.

"Well, what are you going to do in the meantime?"

"Just have dinner for the start."

"I have got five shillings in all the world, and daren't spend it on a dinner."

"Well, I have got five pounds, and as I have ordered up a nice little dinner for two, we may as well eat it. And look here, Rubby, Muerte always comes here to dinner. He is pretty sure to know that you are here, and will come to gloat over you. Just shove those five pounds in your pocket, and you do the paying."

"Not I, dear boy. You shall do that!"

"No, I won't. I am going to stick to you, and bring you good luck next time. I believe I have brought you bad enough luck this time, but we shall see a change. Now, we will pool that money. I want you to take it, because I should spend it faster than you would. You are going to succeed again, and I will act as your legal adviser till you do."

"I can do nothing without capital, dear boy. You see, we have lost everything except the animals. Ha, ha, ha! We should have lost those if it hadn't been for you!"

"How much capital must you have?"

"I might be able to do with five hundred. With a thousand pounds I could start comfortably, and pay the four hundred to Prowall."

"Ha, ha, ha! You must pay that, Rubby; though he did not make a very clever bargain. You see, if you went bankrupt, where would he be? He won't find it easy to sell lions and such-like animals. People, as a rule, don't care for lions as pets. Then, an elephant is all right, but it eats a lot. However, Prowall will come off all right if you can raise a thousand pounds capital."

"Quite so, dear boy; but, candidly speaking, I believe it would be about as easy as for me to raise the Monument—say a dozen feet or so."

"We shall see about that later on, meantime, it's not a bit of good worrying."

"Not a bit. Especially as dinner is coming. The correct time for a man to worry is when he is very hungry, and has no money to buy his next meal with. I would much rather you kept this money, Joe."

"No! I want you to keep it as long as you conveniently can, and then we shall see what can be done. Hush! Here comes someone, and I would not be a bit surprised if it is Muerte. Don't let him think you are downhearted, Rubby."

Rubby winked, and the next moment Muerte entered the room, while the waiter came in to lay the cloth.

"You have had rather a disaster at your little show, Ruabino," said Muerte.

"What?"

"Nasty fire!"

"My good creature," exclaimed Rubby, "when you have been in this line of business as long as I have you will know that little matters like that will occur!"

"Little matter! Why you weren't insured, were you?"

"No; I always take all risk."

"Which, on this occasion, has ruined you. I must say it is what you deserve."

"Very likely! When you get what you deserve, it will be something worse than a fire. Hope you have got a nice dinner, waiter?"

"Yes, sir. Roast duck, French beans, apple sauce, and greenage tart and cream."

"Add half a pint of ale and a bottle of ginger-beer. I know you like the latter, Joe."

"I will have roast duck," said Muerte.

"Sorry, sir; the duck was specially ordered by this young gentleman; but we have some prime cold roast mutton."

"Bah!"

"That is rather an appropriate exclamation to make at the mutton, Muerte," said Joe.

"I don't want any of your impertinence, you young hound!" snarled Muerte. "What else have you, waiter?"

"I'll see, sir," said the waiter, who knew perfectly well there was nothing else; and he had his doubts about that mutton.

"Mutton is very nice, Muerte," observed Rubby.

"Perhaps you would like to eat it, then?"

"No, thanks! Duck is good enough for me. Joe knows that my appetite is very small, and requires pampering—that is why he has ordered something tasty—and because his appetite is the same."

"Sorry, sir," exclaimed the waiter, returning, "but we have nothing else in the house except cold mutton. Very nice, sir!"

"Have you nothing hot?" snarled Muerte.

"Yes," answered Joe. "They have got the fire hot, if you like to go and sit on it. There would be some roast pig then."

"Do you want me to clout your head, boy?"

"Suppose we up-end the fellow, Joe, and give him another flogging?" suggested Rubby.

"We will consider the matter, Rubby," said Joe. "Just bring our dinner up, waiter, while Muerte is deciding what he will have. If you take my advice, old chap, it will be cold roast mutton, seeing that they have got nothing else, and that there is no other place near."

Now, cold shoulder of mutton, fat and underdone, may be all right for those who like it, but Muerte was not one of them.

Rubby and Joe consumed a roast duck between them, and that bird smelt very savoury. It quite spoiled Muerte's appetite for cold roast mutton, and he grumbled the whole time, while Rubby and Joe chaffed him till he got into such a state of fury that he threatened them with personal violence.

"Don't you be rash, old Spanish tinker," said Joe. "Rubby and I would not have the least objection to giving you a thrashing, and we should certainly do so if you did not behave yourself. To my mind, cold mutton is far too good for you, and if I were the waiter I would feed a brute beast like you on dry bread."

"I am glad you are ruined, Ruabino!" cried Muerte, clenching his teeth in his fury.

"Dear boy, if you look like that when you are glad, for goodness' sake look sober," said Rubby. "Your face would make a magnificent gargoye. I never saw anything more hideous in all my life. You ought to get someone to take a coke-hammer to it, and see if they could knock the thing into shape. Give the ugly-looking brute a penny cigar, waiter."

"Twopence is our lowest price, sir."

"Well, cut a twopenny one in half, and give him the stump. He will go out smoking it, and trying to make people think he is a swell. Poor, ungainly-looking brute, I am extremely sorry for him!"

"Are you contemplating setting any other places on fire, Muerte?" inquired Joe.

"You young scoundrel!" roared Muerte, springing to his feet. "What do you mean by that?"

"Arson is a serious crime. You would get a good many years' imprisonment for it; and if you had succeeded in taking my life, you would have been hanged. You had better turn over a new leaf, Muerte, otherwise you will surely fall into the hangman's hands. Shall we go, Rubby? The sight of the miserable wretch makes me feel ill."

"Before you leave this room I demand to know what you meant by those words!" cried Muerte.

"I can easily explain them," said Joe. "I wanted to know if you intended to set fire to other places than Rubby's circus. We happen to know all about what occurred last night, but we can wait our time. I don't intend to tell you what Rubby means to do in the matter, but you will find that out before so very long, and, in the meantime, I don't envy you your feelings. I wouldn't be in your shoes, you incendiary, for all the gold in the world!"

"You lying young miscreant! If you dare to bring such an accusation against me, I will give you in custody."

"Then send for a constable, and see who will be the one he will take!" retorted Joe. "You may think you are safe, and that no witness saw your vile act; but wait a little, Muerte. You may have to wait for three weeks, and then you will wish you had waited longer. Mind, I don't promise you that Rubby will give you three weeks' respite. Do not be surprised if a detective touches you on the shoulder at any moment, and shows you a warrant for your apprehension."

As Joe uttered these words, he fixed his eyes on the miscreant, whose face turned pale, while his passion seemed to turn to fear.

"This is not the first time that you have brought a shameful accusation against me," he said.

"No," answered Joe. "Nor is it the first time that our accusations have been true."

"It is absolutely false on this occasion!"

"Then, Muerte," said Joe, "you have absolutely nothing to fear, and there is no reason why your face should pale, and that look of terror come into your eyes. You will be able to go about with a clear conscience, and to know that, when the time comes for your arrest, you will be able to clear yourself from the charge."

"That is all very well!" exclaimed Muerte, looking very uncomfortable; "but you appear to forget that it is not a pleasant thing to have such a shameful accusation brought against one!"

"No, it is very unpleasant," admitted Joe; "but you may rest assured that we shall not bring it without absolute proof of your guilt—absolute proof in our own minds, you understand. Well, if we are wrong, you will be able to clear yourself."

"Innocent men have been sent to prison."

"When we put you in prison, we shall not be sending an innocent man there. Some men suffer from conscience; you will never do that because you have no conscience; but I am inclined to think that you will suffer from fear for the next few weeks, after that you are likely to suffer from remorse—that is to say, deep regret that your villainy has condemned you to a felon's fate. I think that is all the warning we need give the incendiary, Rubby?"

"Quite so," answered Rubby. "He ought to be able to understand your meaning; and as we shall always know where to place our hands on him, I think we will leave his arrest to a more convenient time. I have a good lot of things to attend to now."

"Yes. There will be the larger circus to purchase; but that won't take so very long, and we shall be able to attend to Muerte's prosecution in the meantime. Suppose we come to see the lawyer now concerning the matter?"

"Right you are, my boy!" answered Rubby. "The sooner Muerte is under lock and key the safer it will be for society."

Then the two left the room, refusing to listen to what Muerte was trying to say about the matter.

And when they had gone he seated himself in a chair, and sat for over an hour gazing into futurity; while, judging by the expression of his evil face, there could not be a doubt that his thoughts were very unpleasant ones.

Now, Rubby and Joe discussed the matter of raising the capital to start a new show, and the more they considered it the more difficult it became.

A week went—so did all their money, a good deal of which they spent on advertisements, which brought them no good; until one morning they awoke to the painful fact that they were penniless.

They had been staying at a little country cottage to save expense, and although they had spent very little on their living, they had spent several pounds in advertising, for they felt that to be their only chance. But they found no one enterprising enough to find the necessary capital to restart the circus, for Rubby had absolutely no security to offer.

On the morning that they left the cottage they had spent their last penny. They neither knew where to sleep that night, nor how they would find their food, and, altogether, things looked about as black as they possibly could.

"Look here, Joe," exclaimed Rubby, when they had walked some miles further into the country, for it mattered little to them which way they took, "this won't do at all! It doesn't matter about me, because I'm getting on, but you are a lad, and I'm not going to drag you down."

"Go on, Rubby, you are talking very nicely, and I'm trying to listen to you, and to think that what you are saying is very clever. I can't say that you have impressed me so far, but perhaps you will improve as you go on."

"It is no joking matter. We can't possibly restart the circus, and it is equally certain that we cannot live without food. Now, you will not have much difficulty in getting a berth of some sort for a start, unless you decide to return to Silas Read. The long and the short of it is that we must part."

"Rats! We are going to stick together. When things look their blackest, you may be sure that there is going to be a change; the only difficulty is to be able to tell when they are at their blackest. However, we will suppose that after to-day they will be getting that way, because we shall be hungry then. Come on, and let's see what will turn up."

Nothing turned up, and that night they slept beneath a hedge. It was far from comfortable, because it was raining, and the night was cold. Then they were both hungry, and the following morning when they awoke, they were hungrier than ever.

"Well, Rubby," exclaimed Joe, "it's going to be a beautiful day."

"But what are day's glories to us, dear boy?"

"I don't know; but—"

"Neither do I, Joe."

"It's better than if it was raining."

"Perhaps so. I have been on my beam ends many a time, but have never been in such a bad position as this. You see, there is such a lot of jealousy in our line, that a man goes through life almost friendless. The only friends he has are those who cannot help him; besides, it is rather dangerous to rely on friends, and unpleasant to a degree. The great question is what is to be done."

"Walk on till we come to some town, and then try to earn an honest penny. It's the only possible thing to do, you know."

"I fear we shall find it an impossible one; however, never say die."

It was a very hopeless journey, and although Rubby generally looked at the bright side of things, he now felt sick at heart. The future appeared to be a blank to him. He could see no hope on any side.

Joe did not appear to worry himself about matters. He laughed and chatted all the way, and his gaiety had a good effect on Rubby's drooping spirits.

At last they came to a spot where a lane turned off to the right up a very steep hill, while the other lane led straight on.

At the bottom of the hill was a deep chalk-pit, on the brink of which was a wooden fence, and as Joe looked over the fence, he could see men working in the pit.

"Wonder if we could get a few days' work there, Rubby?" observed Joe. "It wouldn't be very pleasant work, still, it would be better than being hungry. Here comes a peasant. I'll ask him."

Joe put the question to the man, who eyed the pair closely.

"I don't know as you could get work, my lad," he answered slowly. "Mr. Moss is the lord of the manor, and that 'ere pit belongs to him. But, mind you this, if you did get work, it wouldn't be the sort as you would like, and I'm doubtful if the pay would be what you expect. You see, Mr. Moss is a rare tight one with money. If you give him two days' work for one day's pay, he might take you on, 'cos I know he wants to get up a lot of chalk for his new road. He lives in a large mansion at the top of the hill, and if you like you can put the question to him. There would be no harm done if you really want work, but he'd skin a flint and sell the parings. He would so."

"You sit there, Rubby," exclaimed Joe, "and I will go and interview the beauty. Working for a man like that won't be hard, because it stands to reason that if he underpays, he does not get proper work. I'll tap the dear fellow. I will convince him that you are one of the finest workers on the face of this earth, and that I make a good second. I won't be half an hour."

Rubby did not feel like climbing that hill, so he took Joe's advice, and that worthy started off as quickly as though he had not walked a mile that day.

He had proceeded about a quarter of a mile up the hill, and had reached its steepest part, when he heard the rush of a motor-car, and, looking up the hill, he saw a large car coming down at a terrific speed.

Now, Joe thought little of that, because he knew that chauffeurs are not very particular at what speed they go when in the country, and the lane was fairly broad and level; but when he saw that only a small boy was in the car, he knew that something must be wrong.

The boy could not have been more than seven or eight, and Joe at once came to the conclusion that the car was running away. It must have gone straight into the chalk-pit at the bottom of the lane, as it would have been utterly impossible for the lad to turn it, and the frail wooden fence could never have stopped the car. Such an accident would have been certain death to the boy.

Now Joe heard a cry of terror, and far up the hill he saw a man's form.

There was little time for Joe to think, but it seemed to him there was only one thing to be done. He had stepped to the side of the lane in order to allow the car to pass.

Now he sprang into the middle of that lane, and as the motor-car dashed towards him, he took a short forward run, and leapt high into the air.

The next instant he landed in the car with a shock that almost stunned him, but with a great effort he stopped the engine and jammed down the brakes.

The car swayed violently as its furious pace was checked, then it rushed on the path of the cross lane, smashed down a large portion of the fence, and stopped on the very brink of the chasm.

"What's your name, kiddy?" inquired Joe, glancing at the terrified boy.

"Reggie."

"Well, Reggie," exclaimed Joe, "next time you feel like

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driving a motor-car, take my advice and get someone to come with you. It's all right, Rubby, I can back. Jump in, and I will run her up the hill. Is that tall man who is shouting to us, your father, Reggie?"

"Yes."

"Is his name Mr. Moss?"

"Yes."

"We have reached the darkest hour, Rubby. Don't you interfere in this matter, now. It is one I would like to arrange. Fine car, isn't it? We shall soon be up the hill."

Mr. Moss was a tall, thin man, with a very hard-looking face. Joe thought that he looked just like a man who would akin the proverbial flint, but difficulties never daunted Joe. Moss was a decidedly good-looking man, and he appeared to be about forty years of age.

"Jump in, old chap!" exclaimed Joe. "I'll drive you home all right. Reggie isn't hurt, only frightened; you had better take him in the back, and give it to him for starting the car. It's almost a pity your chauffeur taught him the way. There might have been an accident, you know. That's right, catch hold of him, only let him down lightly, for he's a plucky youngster."

Moss looked surprised at this free and easy style of address, and he gazed keenly at Rubby and Joe.

"You have saved my son's life, my lad," he said. "Did you start the car, Reggie?"

"Yes, only I didn't want it to go as fast as that," answered the youngster.

Moss never spoke a word until they reached some carriage gates which were open, and then he told Joe to drive through, and that worthy pulled up in front of a fine old mansion.

The door was opened by a footman, to whom Moss spoke a few words in an undertone, as he led his little son in, then the footman told Rubby and Joe to follow him.

"He's rather haughty, Rubby," whispered Joe, "but that does not matter. I am going to deal with his master."

They were shown into a small room, which was plainly furnished, and in a few minutes a lad laid the cloth, and brought in a large joint of cold beef and some pickles and bread.

"You can help yourselves," he said, leaving the room.

"I'll do the carving, dear boy!" exclaimed Rubby. "You save it to me, and you shan't go hungry."

Rubby carved in a most liberal manner, and the way that beef disappeared was surprising. They were just commencing their third help, when the haughty footman re-entered the room.

"You are to come this way," he said. "The master wants to speak to you."

"All right, old chap," exclaimed Joe. "Just you go and tell your master that we haven't finished lunch yet, but that we shan't be much more than a quarter of an hour, and at the end of that time he can send you again."

"Well, I never!"

"You can go, my good man," said Joe, with a wave of his hand. Then he winked at Rubby as the astonished footman disappeared.

"It's no good being poor and appearing poor," observed Joe. "My impression is that I shall have a tough nut to crack in Moss; still, I'm going to try him. We've had a feed out of him, at any rate, and we haven't finished yet!"

"Dear boy, we have not," exclaimed Rubby. "If Moss is going to be mean in money matters, he is not going to be mean with his meat—not while I'm carver! A pound of beef inside is better than two pounds of steak over a black eye! Pass the pickles—I like pickles!"

The footman did not return for about half an hour, and then his jaws gaped open as he eyed the beef.

"Step this way!" he said, in his haughtiest manner.

"All right, old chap," answered Joe; "we are ready now! Nice house this, Rubby!"

"Fairish! Nicely furnished. I think that is one of Ruben's pictures. You can generally tell, because he makes his ladies so fat!"

They were shown into a library, the walls of which were covered to the ceiling with rows of books.

Mr. Moss was seated at a handsomely-carved table, and he looked very unapproachable, but Joe was not easily daunted.

"Sit down, Rubby," he said, taking a chair opposite the great man.

"Is the lad your son?" inquired the great man, raising his eyebrows.

"No, dear boy," answered Rubby. "I am—or rather was—a circus proprietor, and Joe—that's his name—is my lion-tamer and general adviser."

"He appears to be cool enough for either position," observed Mr. Moss.

"My dear fellow, it is necessary in his calling. Had he

not been perfectly cool, he could not have done what he has to-day."

"Possibly not. He saved my only son's life. Are you in good circumstances?"

"My circus was burnt down, and I was completely ruined."

"Then the lad is out of employment?"

"Yes."

"Listen to me, my lad," exclaimed Mr. Moss, who now saw an easy way out of his difficulty. "I will find you a situation here, and your wages will be half-a-crown a week, your food being found. If you conduct yourself, as I hope will be the case, to my entire satisfaction, I shall gradually raise your wages, and you will always find employment here."

"Much obliged to you," exclaimed Joe, "but I don't want that sort of employment."

"You wish me to give you money for what you have done?"

"What I did was without any idea of recompense," answered Joe. "If you refuse to give me one penny-piece, and such a thing occurred to-morrow to your child, I would act in a similar manner."

"Well, I am glad to hear you speak like that, my lad! I owe you a debt of gratitude for what you have done, and I wish you to accept this little present as a mark of my esteem."

Moss handed Joe a sovereign, and that worthy tossed it across the table again.

"I am not taking that," said Joe. "If you do owe me a debt of gratitude, you won't cancel it with that sovereign. Had I been a rich man and you a poor boy who had saved the life of my son and heir, I would not have offered you a sovereign. I should have valued my son's life at more than that."

"It is not a matter of the value I place on his life," said Moss, looking rather uncomfortable. "I have offered you a situation which you could probably keep for life."

"And live and die a servant. Thank you for nothing!"

"What do you expect me to do?"

"What do I want you to do is more to the point. Well, you shall know in a very few words. Rubby has been a true friend to me, and he is an honourable man. I want you to lend him a thousand pounds, free of interest—or say at three per cent.—for three years."

"To give you a thousand pounds?" gasped Moss.

"I said lend—at three per cent. interest. The loan to extend for three years, but the principal to be paid back by degrees. The three per cent. to be paid on the reduced capital."

"I shall do no such thing! It is preposterous!"

"You don't consider your son worth a thousand pounds to you?"

"You speak in a very coarse manner, boy!"

"I put the thing plainly to you. Listen to me. I thought I was going to my death, and no thought of recompense ever entered my head. What I did for duty, I would not do for a thousand pounds. That is the absolute truth. Now, I risked my life for you, as it turns out, and I value my life at more than a thousand pounds. I ask you for the loan of that amount—not the gift of it."

"It is giving it. I should never get it back. I won't do it. I will give you five pounds. That is the utmost I will do."

"I will take the loan of a thousand pounds or nothing," said Joe.

"Do you expect to blackmail me?"

"If you think I am capable of such a thing, you have a right to your opinion. As a matter of fact, no one on this earth will ever know a word about the matter from me. I am not saying that what you have offered is not sufficient. I should consider nothing quite sufficient. Rubby wants a thousand pounds to start the circus again. He can get all his company together, and we can get the animals on payment of the sum of four hundred pounds. The six hundred pounds will be sufficient capital for the rest, and you would surely get your money back within the three years. The interest on it would also be promptly paid."

"I tell you that I will not do it. I won't risk a thousand pounds."

"You risk it when you invest in other things."

"I get some sort of security for my money. Here I get none—beyond the word of a showman."

"You would find the word of a showman good security."

"Suppose he should fail?"

"Then you will lose your money, the same as you would have lost your son had I failed."

"It is useless your arguing," said Moss. "I will not do it. I cannot afford to lose a thousand pounds."

"You mean you will not afford to risk it?"

"I will find you both employment on my estate, and—"

"We will not accept it," interposed Joe. "What we will accept is the loan of one thousand pounds."

"Now, my lad," exclaimed Moss; "I wish to act fairly in the matter, and to befriend one who has certainly acted with great bravery. You did risk your life, and you did save my son's; of that there can be no question."

"Well, you need not trouble yourself the slightest about the matter," said Joe. "I pledge my word not to mention to a soul what took place, whether you do anything for me or not, so that you have nothing to fear concerning the opinion of the world. Rubby needs a thousand pounds capital, and he is going to get it somehow, or I am very much mistaken."

"You appear to be a sharp lad," said Moss. "Now, I ask you, if you were in my place would you, as a matter of business, lend me a thousand pounds, knowing nothing about me, except that I was in a state of ruin?"

"I would not do so as a matter of business," answered Joe; "but if you had saved Rubby's life—he is the dearest friend I have on earth—I would give you a thousand pounds. It is not a matter of business—it is a matter of gratitude."

"And you wish to make a market out of it?"

"Yes; under all the circumstances of the case. I am assuming that a thousand pounds is a trivial matter to you."

"A thousand pounds is a trivial matter to no man!"

"Perhaps so. But what I mean to say is, that were you to lose that amount, you would not have to curtail your expenditure!"

"All the same, I will not do it."

"We will make arrangements to go up to London to-morrow, Rubby," said Joe. "You can make the purchase there. He is going to do it."

"Indeed I am not!" said Moss. "Nothing is further from my mind."

"Nothing is nearer to your mind, except your son, of whose escape you are now thinking. I tell you, Mr. Moss, the fault you make in life is placing too great a value on money. When you have lent this sum, as you will lend it this afternoon, you will worry about it for days, and its loss, as you think, will cause you months of uneasiness. Now, contrast this with what would have been your feelings had your little son been lying lifeless in that pit. Fancy the agony of mind you would have suffered, as you stood by your son's grave, and the years of sorrow that would have followed it. Then contrast this with the uneasiness of losing a thousand pounds. One would cause you annoyance, the other bitter grief."

"It is useless talking. I cannot, I will not do it!"

At that moment, a dark, beautiful lady entered the room. There were tears in her eyes as she placed her hands on Joe's shoulders.

"My brave lad!" she murmured. "I am Reggie's mother. I know what you have done. What can I say to you?"

"Nothing, madam!" answered Joe. "I have asked a favour of your husband there, and he has refused, although I believe he is going to do what I want. I was employed in a circus, owned by my friend Rubby. It was burnt down, and the loss caused his ruin. To start again, he must have a thousand pounds, not as a gift, but as a loan. Rubby will pay the amount back in three years' time, and pay three per cent. interest on the

sum which remains owing. That is to say, he will pay the loan back by degrees, and always pay the interest on the balance punctually. I make no request on my own behalf, though I should benefit by it, because he would employ me. I may tell you, madam, that he risked his life to save mine at the fire. Had he done otherwise, you would have lost your son, for it is certain that I should not have been at the spot to save him. The fire which ruined Rubby, saved your son."

"Reginald, you have never yet refused a request I have made you."

"That is different, Dorothy. I like to make you happy, and—"

"Then, my dear Reginald, make me happy now. I beg of you to do what this heroic lad asks."

Then Mrs. Moss placed her hands on her husband's cheeks, slightly raised his face, and kissed his brow.

"Where is my cheque-book, Dorothy?" he exclaimed. "Oh, here it is."

There was silence in the room, as he wrote out a cheque for a thousand pounds, and then he handed it to Joe, who was certainly the calmest person in the room.

"There you are, my lad. I make you a free gift of the amount."

"I will not accept it as a free gift. This is a loan, and it shall be paid back. If Rubby fails, every penny of it shall be repaid, with the interest. You will see. Shall Rubby give you an undertaking to that effect?"

"No, my lad! Leave the matter as it is! I trust you may be successful for your own sakes. Joe, you are a hero, and you are a very clever lad. Your friend has cause to be proud of you. And I wish you to believe this, for it is the solemn truth. Whatever my action may have been, I feel the deepest gratitude to you. I believe that I was wrong, and that you were right."

"Thank you. I have my doubts concerning the point, and I meant to do my very utmost for him. You will hear from us shortly."

"May heaven bless you, my lad," murmured Dorothy, as she kissed his brow, much as she had kissed her husband's. And thus Rubby and Joe took their leave, while, for some time, the little showman was speechless with amazement.

"You must deal with that money, Joe," he said at last. "You will bring me luck."

"Then the first thing we will do is to cash the cheque, Rubby. I think Moss is all right at heart; but he's fond of the money, and he might change his mind, you know, so we will change his cheque before he has time to do anything of the sort."

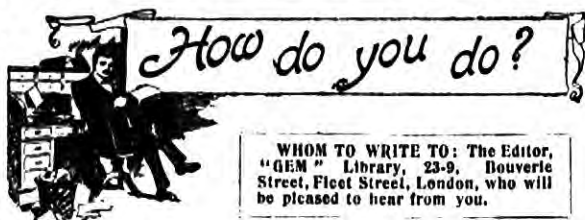
And they get the money for the cheque that very morning, and, at Joe's suggestion, Rubby opened an account at the same bank.

"You see, Rubby," said Joe, "it's a large amount, and will be safer in the bank than in our pockets. You can easily transfer the account later on if you want to do so. We will have five pounds of it now, and go to London."

Thus the matter was arranged.



This story will be concluded in next Thursday's number, when a New and Novel Football Competition will appear. £50 in Cash Prizes for Readers. Look out for it!



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"What, in the present condition of Europe, is the main duty which
 devolves on the Government of this country? Their main duty is to
 make provision betimes for the European conflict which may not
 improbably be forced on us before many years have elapsed. . . . I
 say it is the duty of a Government who have means of information
 at their disposal which is not available to the general public to
 provide betimes for that danger—a danger of which I, in common, I
 believe, with most people who can speak with real authority on
 foreign affairs, am firmly convinced."—

LORD CROMER, IN THE HOUSE OF LORDS,
Tuesday, July 21st, 1908.

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