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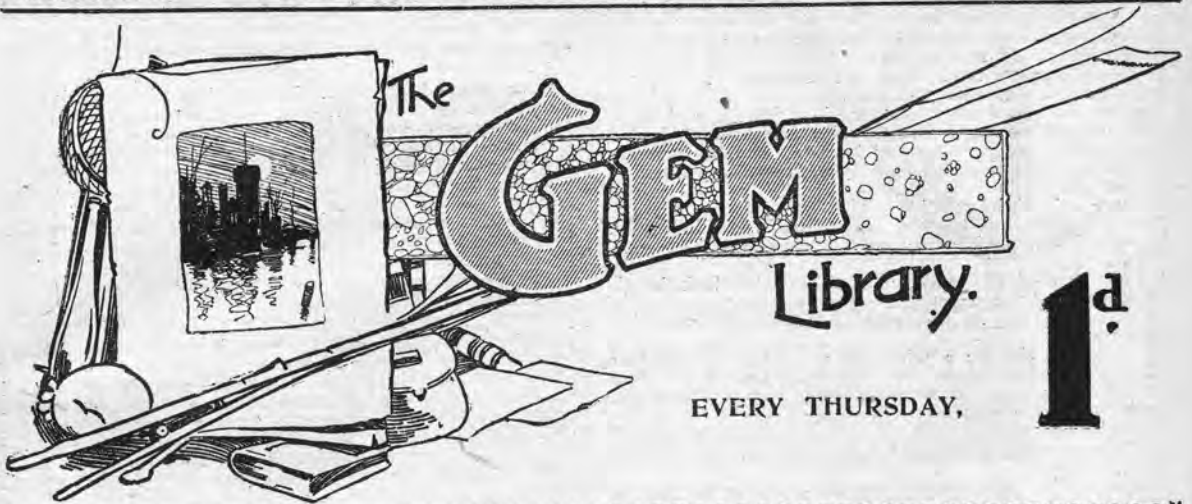
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THE RIVAL EDITORS



A Grand Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co.
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CHAPTER 1. Gore's Inspiration

"WOTTAH!"

"Dear me!"

"Welease me at once, Skimpole! You are wumpling my waistcoat! We—"

"Dear me! I am exceedingly sorry, D'Arcy. You see, I was deeply interested in the question dealing with the alleviation of the downtrodden condition of the lower classes, and I was unaware of your approach."

The amateur Socialist, Determinist, and what not, dis-

engaged himself from his affectionate grasp of Arthur Augustus, and stood blinking at him behind his huge spectacles.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, known as the swell of St. Jim's, or to his chums more affectionately as Gussy, regarded Skimpole, of the Shell, with an air of dignified hauteur.

"I accept your apology, Skimpole; but in the futuuh, I should suggest that you defah the considervation of your wotten pwoblems until you weach your study."

While he delivered this admonishment, the swell of St. Jim's carefullly straightened his elaborately-figured fancy waistcoat.

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No. 59 New Series

There was no great damage done; but the bump with which the two had met as they rounded the corner of the corridor had proved more of a mental than a physical shock to Arthur Augustus, and the careless way in which Skimpole had flung his arms round him had rumpled his "dig," a great deal more than his waistcoat.

The swell of St. Jim's readjusted his monocle, and made to proceed on his way; but the amateur Socialist laid a detaining and bony forefinger on his arm. Arthur Augustus came to a stop, and stared frigidly at the bumpy forehead of Skimpole.

"You are detainin' me!"

"It is a matter of the gravest import!" said Skimpole.

"You see, I was thinking as I came along of you, and—"

"Of me?"

"Yes," replied Skimpole, with a far-away look in his pale blue eyes. "You see, you represent—"

"I am in a hurry!" interrupted Arthur Augustus, trying to edge past.

"I won't detain you a minute!" exclaimed the amateur Socialist, suddenly waking up. "Let me see. Where was I? Oh, I know! As I was saying, you represent the autocratic and the oppressor of the downtro—"

"I absolutely refuse to be described as an oppvessah!" cried D'Arcy, shaking himself free from the detaining hand. "Wubbish!"

"Dear me! He's gone!" muttered Skimpole, gazing after the swell of St. Jim's. "He seemed rather annoyed about something," he mused as he walked, with bent head, in the direction of his study. "It's a great pity, and he can't help being one of the unenlightened!"

The amateur Socialist sighed as he entered the study he shared with Gore, Mellish, and Clifton Dane, and in a very abstracted frame of mind he seated himself at his little table in the darkest and most uncomfortable corner of the room.

Of a peaceful nature, and notwithstanding his peculiar ideas, much liked by some of the juniors, tolerated by others, and disliked by few, Skimpole still found his path a thorny one, his great trouble being that no one, not even good-humoured Tom Merry, would listen to his views on social questions.

True, his great work on Socialism, now somewhere about the nine hundred and thirty-sixth chapter, was some consolation, but what the amateur Socialist was really craving for was an audience—a band of followers that would listen to his propaganda, and whose applause would help him to scale new heights. Skimpole propped his chin on his hand, and sighed again heavily.

"Chuck that ghastly row! Can't you be quiet?" said a grumpy voice.

The amateur Socialist started out of his reverie, and blinked apologetically at a pair of big feet propped on the mantelpiece. From the muddy boots his gaze travelled over a pair of rucked socks, a short length of creased trouser-leg, and then finally rested on the coarse, untidy mop of hair belonging to his study companion Gore, known to the chums of the Fourth and the Shell as a cad, and to the Third-Formers as a bully.

Skimpole felt very much like the little boy who threatened to go out in the garden and eat worms, woolly ones, and for a time he sat silently regarding his unsympathetic study mate.

Gore preserved a taciturn attitude, and went on with his reading. He was turning over the sheets of "Tom Merry's Weekly," and at last flung the paper down with a disagreeable snort.

"Ugh! Bah!" he grumbled, shifting round in the big wicker chair he had planted in the middle of the hearthrug. "What a bundle of rubbish! I never read such rot in all my life! It's positively sickening!" Gore's beady eyes rested on Skimpole's face, and his snub nose stuck aggressively over the top of the chairback. "Can't you speak?" he demanded.

From sheer force of habit, Skimpole had picked up his notebook, and was engaged in making voluminous entries. He looked up with a startled expression.

"Yes, yes—oh, yes!" he murmured, as Gore's question penetrated to his mind. "I—"

"Rats!" interrupted Gore politely. "You've got water on the brain, or something or other!"

"I can assure you," said Skimpole, with a slight flush on his pale cheeks, "my brain is in perfect working order!"

"More rats?"

"I—"

"Shut up, idiot!"

The amateur Socialist rose from his chair, and closed his notebook with a bang.

Gore grinned delightedly. An exhibition of temper from the gentle Skimpole was indeed a spectacle not often witnessed. As a rule, taunts and gibes passed over his head

unnoticed, but the coarse jeer of the cad of St. Jim's on this occasion reached its mark, and Skimpole, nose in the air and notebook under arm, marched to the door.

"Ha, ha—"

Gore stopped abruptly. Lazy and good-for-nothing, he found time hang heavily, and it occurred to him that with the disappearance of Skimpole, he would be left alone in the study, and anything was better than that. There was always the prospect of getting a little mild excitement out of teasing the amateur Socialist, provided he could get him to stop. In the matter of "ragging" to boiling-point, and yet not go too far, was a special study of Gore's, and he rather prided himself on his capacity to work up another chap to a state of nervous irritation.

"You're not going, are you, Skimmy?"

Skimpole stopped and stared.

"Don't be an ass!" said Gore amiably. "I was only joking. Can't you take a little innocent chaff without getting riled over nothing?"

Skimpole still hesitated. He could grapple with social questions and all sorts of problems on paper, but the sudden change of Gore's attitude was beyond his understanding. Guileless himself, he was inclined to judge others, when he did so at all, very leniently, and he returned to his chair almost apologetically. One might have thought that he, not Gore, was the offender.

The cad of St. Jim's was not slow to take advantage of Skimpole's generous spirit.

"Do you think there's any truth in what What-you-call-him says?" he observed casually, pointing to a thick book on the corner of Skimpole's table. "I rather think he's wrong myself."

The junior took the bait like a hungry gudgeon, and his eyes glistened with excitement, and he launched into a long exposition of his views.

Gore leaned back in his chair with half-closed eyes, and nodded and grunted from time to time.

Skimpole talked and waved his arms.

Every time he paused for breath Gore nodded his head. He was enjoying himself immensely.

At last the amateur Socialist finished his peroration, and regarded Gore with his head on one side.

"Hum! I don't quite agree with you!" said the cad of St. Jim's. "What was that you said at the beginning?"

Gore had not the remotest idea of what Skimpole had been saying, but it did not matter, for the amateur Socialist eagerly completed the sentence.

"Oh, yes; that's it!" exclaimed Gore. "Do you mind explaining that to me again?"

"Certainly!" replied Skimpole, delighted to find so interested a listener. "I am sure, once you get into the subject, you will agree with me."

"I don't know about that," replied Gore, with a nice assumption of one considering a knotty point. "Just tell me what you said over again!"

The junior launched into his argument again, and fairly trembled with excitement as he warned to his subject, and fancied that he could see signs of wavering in his listener.

"I don't see that you've proved your point at all," said Gore, when Skimpole ceased speaking. "You said—what was that you said about the condition of affairs in Russia?"

"Poland," corrected Skimpole.

"Oh, yes; that's right! Sorry!"

"I'll explain again," said the junior. "It's rather a difficult subject to master at first, but you will soon get into it."

Gore nodded his head, and stifled a yawn. He was getting rather tired of his joke, and the fun of the thing was becoming stale, and Skimpole showed no signs of getting fagged.

"Hang off a bit!" he said, interrupting in the middle of one of the enthusiast's choicest sentences. "I'll have to think over what you said. We'll talk this over again another time."

The amateur Socialist looked rather surprised and disappointed, but retired to his table, and took up his notebook.

"All right!" he said cheerfully. "I'll get on with the next chapter of my book."

This did not suit Gore at all, and he scowled at the copy of the "Weekly" lying beside his chair. His scowl changed to a grin as he leaned over and picked up the paper. For the next few minutes he was unusually quiet, and he busied himself with turning over in his mind a sudden inspiration. After a while he contemplated the bent head of the industrious Skimpole, and a grin curled the corners of his mouth.



"Ugh! Bah!" grumbled Gore, shuffling restlessly in the big wicker chair. "What a bundle of rubbish!"
I never read such rot in all my life! It's positively sickening!"

CHAPTER 2.

"Making-Up" "Tom Merry's Weekly."

"WELL, there's plenty of copy here, anyway!" exclaimed Tom Merry, chief of the study, editor of the "Weekly," and leader of the Shell. "You waded through that little lot, Manners!" he went on, throwing a bulky parcel of manuscript across the table. "I'm afraid we shall have to cut out the fashion article, or else heave out the instalment of 'Sir Pathead and His Fayre Ladye'!"

A howl of remonstrance came from the swell of St. Jim's and Jack Blake.

"Bai Jove, Tom Mewwy, you can't do that! You will spoil the whole papah, besides—"

"Cut out whatever you like," shouted the chief of Study 6, "but don't touch the serial! Why, it's the most popular feature in the whole thing! Did you speak, Figgins?"

The long-legged member of the New House shook his head.

"Shut up!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Here, Lowther, just have a look at this poem of Herries'. I expect it's a lot of drivel, but you may as well see if it's any good. He may have cribbed it from some American mag."

"That's a beastly libel!" cried Herries indignantly. "I wouldn't think of such a rotten trick! Why, it's absolutely original! You've never found anything of mine that wasn't!"

"Come to think of it, I haven't," said Tom Merry. "They've all been too jolly rotten to have been cribbed!"

Herries grunted disgustedly.

"I bet my contributions have been a jolly sight better

than some others I could mention!" he muttered resentfully.

"Shut up!"

Tom Merry grinned cheerfully as he glanced up at the junior.

"It's all right, Herries," he said. "Must take some of you chaps down a peg or two now and again, or you'd be wanting to run the paper on your own!"

For a time the work of going through the various manuscripts proceeded in silence.

The Terrible Three—Merry, Manners, and Lowther—occupied three sides of the table, the other juniors, scattered about the small study, made themselves as comfortable as limited space would permit.

Arthur Augustus, in languid repose, lounged against the mantelpiece, and studied the tip of his elegant, neatly-shod foot.

"How do you spell sayvoire fair?" exclaimed Merry suddenly. "I wish to goodness you chaps who want to air your knowledge of languages would write clearly! Lemme see, you were the culprit last time, Blake. Now it's Gussy. What does it mean, anyhow? Can't it be expressed in English?"

"Quite imposs., deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus. "I am quite sure I have spelt it cowwectly—savough fail, s-a-v-v-v—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Jack Blake. "How many more 'v's, Gussy? That's only three, so far! Can't you chuck in a few 'y's' and 'z's'?"

The swell of St. Jim's screwed his monocle firmly in his eye, and turned to the grinning leader of Study 6.

"Your wibaldwy, Blake, is only equalled by your uttah

ignorance of the Fwench language. I wequest you to be silent while I explain the meaning of sa-sa-savowy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors howled with laughter at this.

"Why," exclaimed Fatty Wynn, with a chuckle, "you called it savoure just now."

"No, I did not!"

"Yes, you did!" cried Digby.

Arthur Augustus looked at the grinning faces haughtily.

"Here, you put that into plain English," said Tom Merry, throwing the sheets of carefully written manuscript over the table. "I've got some dim idea that you mean to say those in the know, or having more tact, or something of that kind. Anyhow, this is not a beastly French journal, so you just content yourself with your mother tongue."

"I absolutely refuse," said the swell of St. Jim's, stooping to pick up the fallen sheets. "I—"

"All right!" replied Tom Merry calmly. "Chuck over that article of Skimpole's on the what-you-call-it of the aristocracy, Monty. We'll leave out the fashion article this week."

Arthur Augustus gave a gasp of dismay.

"Oh, Mewwy!"

The editor of the "Weekly" took no notice of the appeal. His blue pencil busily scored through some of the amateur Socialist's best sentences.

"Mewwy, I—I—undah the cires, I will altah the article."

"Right-ho, then. Let's have it!" replied Tom Merry briskly. "Just as you like, you know. This stuff of Skimpy's is not so bad, cut down to four lines. Blessed if I know what it's all about, but still— What have you put? Ha, ha, ha!"

The swell of St. Jim's coloured as Tom Merry leaned back in his chair laughing heartily.

"Just listen to this," he gasped at last. "'The choice and taste in the selection of a tie of suitable colour is an easy matter to—'—this is where the French jingo was—is to the man of the world a comparatively easy matter.' Ha, ha, ha!"

"He, he, he!"

"Is that meant to be a humorous article?" inquired Blake.

"P'raps it is," suggested Manners. "Blest if I can see any fun in it, though. It's something like that beastly spinach joke he was trotting round. Let it go, though. No one ever reads the fashion stuff, so it don't make any difference."

"I shall administah a feahful fwash—"

"Here, hold him back!" yelled Jack Blake. "Collar him, Digby!"

The indignant swell of St. Jim's came to a sudden stop as Digby seized a pen, dipped into the editorial inkpot, and held it suggestively.

"Not another step, or I fire," he said solemnly.

"You wottah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, drawing back hurriedly.

"No back answers, now, or—"

Arthur Augustus completed his retreat, and retired to the fender in dignified silence.

For a short time there was nothing but a low murmur of voices and the rustling of paper.

"Whose is this?" inquired Tom Merry suddenly, holding up a sheet of manuscript.

"I don't know. Ask me!" said Blake, scrutinising the paper.

"What is it?"

"Read it out!"

"All right, I will!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Listen!"

"In the spring our Gussy's fancy
Lightly turns to thoughts of how
He may change last season's toppah
For the tile he saw just now."

"Good!"

"Rotten!"

"Fine! Ha, ha, ha!"

A chorus of varied opinions greeted the effusion.

"Who wrote it?"

"I don't know," said Tom Merry, looking closely at the sheet of paper. "The writing is disguised, or else some Third-Former has written it."

An indignant expression flitted across Jack Blake's face, but no one noticed it.

"Shall you use it?"

"Rather! It's not so bad. What?"

"I pwotest!" exclaimed D'Arcy. "It's absolutely untwue. I nevah thought of such a thing. I ordahed a new toppah the othah day."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poetic license, Gussy!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "You must allow a little latitude, you know. Poets and story

writers are always allowed to tell fibs, else there wouldn't be any books written."

"I don't know about that," said Lowther judiciously. "I don't think that stuff about D'Arcy and his beastly fancy and his hat is much good. Besides, it's not spring yet."

"Oh, goodness, don't get on to that tack, Monty!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "What the policeman does it matter if it isn't quite spring? In it goes. Mark it to go at the foot of 'The Fatted Lady'; it'll brighten up the column a bit."

"Pwey excuse me, Tom Mewwy," said the swell of St. Jim's, advancing with outstretched hand.

"What do you want?"

"I desiah to fwash the perpetwatah of that wubbish. Pwey allow me to pewuse the w'iting. Pwey get out of the way, Blake."

Jack Blake moved his sturdy shoulders a little further in front of the swell of St. Jim's, and a curious expression on his face caught Tom Merry's quick eye.

"Out of the way, Blake!" he exclaimed. "Let Gussy have a look. No larks, mind!"

"Certainly not, Tom Mewwy. I will weturn the wotten scwibble to you pwomptly."

Jack Blake turned away with an exaggerated air of unconcern as Tom Merry handed the paper to Arthur Augustus.

The swell of St. Jim's held the writing close to the lamp. The juniors regarded him silently.

Suddenly Arthur Augustus straightened his back with a jerk, that brought his head in violent contact with Fatty Wynn's nose.

"Ow!" yelled the Falstaff of St. Jim's, clapping his hand to his face. "Ow!"

"That's what you get for peeping," chuckled Digby unfeelingly.

"Gr-r-r! oh by dose!" muttered Fatty Wynn, holding his handkerchief to his damaged nose. "By dose!"

Arthur Augustus patted his disarranged hair, and bestowed but a passing glance on the injured fat one. His eye was fixed on Jack Blake, and the leader of Study 6 returned the look with rather a sheepish grin.

Tom Merry chuckled, and the others stared in astonishment as the swell of St. Jim's held out the paper and pointed an accusing finger at Blake.

"You wote this!"

Jack Blake burst into a hearty laugh.

"I plead guilty, Gussy," he cried. "Don't look so cross."

For a brief moment Arthur Augustus had fancied that his chum would crave pardon in humblest form, and the light manner in which the leader of Study 6 treated the matter hardened his heart.

"I twacked you by the tail of your g's, Blake, and I shall no longah considah you as a fwend. I demand an instant apology. I shall frow this wretched thing into the—"

"No you don't, Gussy!" cried Tom Merry. "That's the property of the 'Weekly.' I am surprised at you going back on your word."

"Bai Jove, I was cawwed away!" exclaimed the swell of St. Jim's. "Take the howwid scwall!"

"Look here, Gussy," said Jack Blake, "you don't want to make a song about a little thing like that. I'm sorry if you're sorry."

Arthur Augustus eyed the penitent Blake closely, and, apparently satisfied, allowed the matter to drop, with an air of dignity, but partially satisfied; but while the others laughed and chatted, he pondered over Blake's last words, without coming to any satisfactory conclusion.

"Look here, Blake," observed Tom Merry presently, "just go over this stuff of yours, will you. The pages have got a bit mixed. Not that it matters much, for I dare say the adventures of Sir Fathead would be just as exciting read backwards as forwards."

The author of the serial story gathered up his precious MSS. lovingly, and gave a sniff.

"Why, this is the best instalment of the whole story. Let me read you a bit."

"No, don't!" said Tom Merry hastily. "I've read it all, in parts, but it doesn't seem to run on somehow."

"There's a page missing!" howled Blake. "You're a fine chap to edit a paper, I must say! You—"

"The editor is not responsible for loss of stories," interrupted Merry calmly.

"Oh, rats!"

Jack Blake rummaged over the litter of papers on the table.

"Why, here it is," he cried indignantly, "right in front of you!"

"Why don't you pin your stuff together?" said Monty Lowther. "You can't expect us to waste our time looking for missing papers. Here, let's have it! All the rest of the copy is ready to be packed up."

"You go and eat coke!" said Jack Blake tartly. "You can't write a story to save your life. All you can do is to pass remarks—silly remarks about other chaps' work."

"What else is an editor for?" commented Manners. "The stuff is stupid enough, in any case. Must let off steam sometimes."

"Oh, you're too funny for words!" retorted Jack Blake. "Get on with your washing, and do as your uncle tells you. How's the nose, Fatty?"

"Let me have a look at it," exclaimed Figgins, taking his knife from his pocket. "You ought to let me lance it, you know. You're too full-blooded, you know."

"Never mind what I am, or what I know," exclaimed Fatty Wynn. "You keep away with that beastly knife. I'm all right; I'm not going to be bled, or anything else."

"You don't know what's good for you," said Figgins, with an air of knowledge. "Bleeding in the old days used to be a remedy for everything."

"Oh, did it?" said Fatty pointedly. "Well, nobody ever got biffed on the nose by Gussy in the old days, so it can't be any good for that. Ow!"

"Jingo!" exclaimed Herries, bringing down his fist with a thump on Wynn's portly back. "You're getting quite smart in your old age, Fatty."

Fatty Wynn glared indignantly, as he whipped out his handkerchief and clapped it to his nose.

"You've bade by dose bleed again," he mumbled. "You silly ass! Can't you keep dose hands ob yours to yourself? I'm surprised ad you."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Still holding his nose, Fatty Wynn waddled after the laughing junior.

"Led me ged ad him!" he muttered.

Herries whisked round Arthur Augustus, and swung him right into the path of the oncoming Fatty. The pair met with a crash. A grunt came from Fatty Wynn, and a howl of horrified dismay from the swell of St. Jim's.

The force of the impact jerked Fatty's arm upwards, and Arthur Augustus leaped back in dismay as a tiny crimson drop appeared on his shirt-cuff. Another tiny drop lighted on the paper in front of Tom Merry.

"Wottah!"

"Here, you go out in the corridor!" cried Tom Merry. "We don't want to be covered with gore. Not so much of it! One's enough!"

"Shove a key down the back of your neck," suggested Jack Blake. "Here," he went on, grabbing the poker, "try this!"

"Ow! wow!" howled Fatty Wynn, prancing about. "It's—it's h-hot!"

For an instant Jack Blake looked startled, but he speedily remembered that the poker was stone cold, and realised that the sudden contact with the cold steel had deceived Fatty Wynn, and he doubled up with laughter as the poker clattered to the floor, and Fatty subsided into a chair gasping for breath.

Herries discreetly took up a position a good distance from Fatty, and Arthur Augustus flung open the door and vanished in the direction of the bath-room.

CHAPTER 3.

"A Friend in Need is—"

"BY Jove, it's time for tea!" exclaimed Jack Blake, looking at his watch. "Time for tea!" he repeated, with emphasis.

"So it is!" exclaimed Figgins. "I feel quite hungry."

Fatty Wynn put his handkerchief away and sat up, with an eager expression on his face.

"So do I!" he cried, fixing his twinkling little eyes on Tom Merry.

"Why, I quite forgot!" said Digby. "I feel famished! Don't you, Herries?"

"Rather!"

"And so do I!"

"Hallo, you woke up, Kerr?" inquired Tom Merry. "You haven't had much to say for yourself. Sorry you feel hungry."

"Shall I put the kettle on?" inquired Blake.

"Eh?"

Monty Lowther and Manners chuckled to themselves. There was an innocence in the expression of their chum's question that foretold some fun.

"Shall I put the kettle on?" repeated Jack Blake.

"Ta! Yes, do, old chap. It's very kind of you."

"Not at all," replied the chief of Study 6, clapping the kettle on the fire.

"I'll help lay the table," said Fatty Wynn, heaving himself from the comfortable depths of the armchair.

"Oh, don't you bother, Fatty!"

"But I want to. It's no bother at all," insisted Fatty Wynn.

"I'll help you clear the table," cried Figgins.

"You're very kind, Figgy," said Lowther, "but we can manage all right, thanks!"

Figgins protested, and in the middle of the discussion Tom Merry got up from his chair and started gathering up his papers.

"Kettle's on the boil!" said Blake.

"Good!"

"Aren't you going to make the tea?"

"In a minute. It's awfully good of you chaps to take all this trouble, but aren't you going to get any tea yourselves?" inquired Tom Merry sweetly.

Jack Blake's jaw dropped, and he stood petrified with astonishment.

Manners gave a curious sort of gurgle, and blew his nose violently.

Lowther hurried to the cupboard with a convulsive snigger, and made an awful clatter with an empty biscuit-tin.

"Oh—oh!" gasped Blake. "You—you mouldy Shellfish! Why, I—I thought that—that we were going to have tea here! You—"

"I'm awfully sorry, Blake," said Tom Merry, with a great air of concern. "But, you see—"

"Oh, rats!" exclaimed Jack Blake. "Here, you chaps, let's get out of this! We'll have tea on our own! We don't want a mouldy—Hallo, Figgy's gone!"

For once the long-legged chief had done a bit of quick thinking, and, marshalling his followers, Fatty Wynn and Kerr had beaten a hasty and silent retreat while the others were engaged in turning over in their minds the trick that they had let themselves in for.

With their noses in the air, Blake & Co. retired with dignity, muttering dire threats of vengeance.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Tom Merry, as the door closed.

"P'raps if they'd stopped, they would have been wilder still. There's not much in the larder, is there?"

"Only a few biscuits," replied Manners, with a melancholy smile, "unless we count your bottles of cod-liver-oil."

ANOTHER NEW READER!



When you have finished this number of "The Gem" Library, will you kindly hand it on to a friend?—Editor.

NEXT THURSDAY: "TOM MERRY IN LIVERPOOL." A School Tale of the Boys of "The Gem" Library. St. Jim's, by Martin Clifford. No. 59.

We might try a little spread on some bread. There's a dry crust here."

"B-r-r-r!" shuddered Monty Lowther. "Suppose we shall have to get tea in hall. This is rotten. I don't half like it. Haven't you any tin at all?"

"Tuppence—that's all," said Manners.

"My worldly is that!" cried Tom Merry, planking a battered halfpenny down. "Never mind, I shall have some more to-morrow!"

"What's the good of that?" grunted Monty Lowther disconsolately. "We might have borrowed a couple of bob from Blake. He's generally pretty flush."

"So we might. Why didn't you think of that before?" exclaimed Manners. "You are a fathead!"

"Who are you calling a fathead?" retorted Lowther, looking very warlike.

"You, of course! Fancy ragging a chap with money when we're broke!"

"I didn't rag him!" cried Manners. "Merry started the wheeze, and jolly funny it was! You were glad enough to cackle with your head in the cupboard, anyway! Some chaps are never satisfied. I never—"

"Children be quiet! Peace! Pax! Be good! If we'd thought of the state of the exchequer, it wouldn't have made a bit of diff. So where's the odds?" said Tom.

"That's true enough," admitted Manners grudgingly. "All the same I—"

"Oh, shut up, grumpy!" interrupted Tom Merry cheerily. "Let's make the best of it, and take tea in state. We will honour the hall with our company."

The Terrible Three left their study with regretful glances at the kettle simmering on the hob, and walked silently down the long corridor.

It was a come-down for them to take tea in hall, and they could fancy the ironic greetings that would be showered upon them.

An appetising odour of fried sausages tickled their noses as they passed one of the studies, and Manners grunted disgustedly.

"Greedy little pigs!" he muttered. "I wonder some of them don't make themselves sick! I— Ha, ha, ha!"

The junior's grumble finished with a laugh as he caught sight of the grin on his chums' faces.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Myes, it does make a difference when the other chap's got the sausage," observed Tom Merry. "Who's this coming along?"

"Dane!"

There was a ring of hope in Monty Lowther's voice.

"Hallo!"

"Hallo!"

"Where are you chaps off to?"

"Tea!"

"Tea! What, going visiting?"

"No, we're not," said Tom Merry grimly. "We're going to have tea in hall."

"Tea in hall! Some wheeze on? Ha, ha, ha!"

"There's nothing to laugh at!" snapped Manners. "I don't see anything particularly funny in that!"

"Oh, go hon!" laughed Tom Merry. "It's not like you, Manners, to be so ratty! Cheer up!"

"Half a mo, you chaps," said Clifton Dane. "Suppose you invite me to tea?"

The Terrible Three stared at Dane in surprise.

"Off your rocker?" inquired Tom Merry. "Or must we explain that we're broke? Stony broke! I'll write it down for you, if you like."

"No need. I know all about that. Can I come to tea?"

The drift of Dane's talk dawned on Tom Merry, and he brought his hand down with a thump on the Indian's back.

"Jolly decent of you, Dane! Of course you can come to tea! It's a case of bring your own bread-and-butter, but—"

"Oh, rot!" laughed Dane, his dark, flashing eyes gleaming with pleasure. "I'll cut off and get the grub! Sha'n't be a tick!"

With cheerful smiles and light tread, the three returned to their study and lost no time in refilling the kettle again.

"Blest if I don't think the Indian in him makes him a sight more what you call it!" commented Monty Lowther.

"I don't know what you're getting at, but I quite agree with you, Monty," said Tom Merry. "Stop gassing now. Here he comes!"

Clifton Dane came in loaded with parcels, and emptied them on to the table.

"You're a brick!" cried Tom Merry. "Make the tea, Manners."

Tea was made, and the juniors gathered round the well-supplied table, and the study rang with their merry chatter, and the clatter of teacups.

CHAPTER 4.

Gore's Suggestion.

"T'S no good waiting for him; he won't come now, and a jolly good job, too!"

Gore gave expression to this pleasant little comment on Dane's absence from his study, and dragged his chair from the hearthrug to the table.

"Get your feet out of the way, Mellish!" he growled. "Your beastly trotters are always in the road!"

Mellish gave a sidelong glance at Gore's own pair of ungainly feet, and curled his lip disdainfully; but a second glance at the cad of St. Jim's face stopped the utterance of the retort that rose to his lips, and he vented his spite on Skimpole.

"Be careful, Mellish!" said the amateur Socialist mildly, as a sharp elbow nearly sent his teacup into his lap.

"Oh, shut up!" muttered Mellish. "As a sincere Socialist, you ought not to mind a little thing of that kind."

Skimpole blinked solemnly at the Fourth-Former.

"As a sincere Socialist," he observed quietly, "I study the comfort of—"

"Hand over that jam!" interrupted Gore. "Not so much talk!"

The jampot was passed over, and the meal proceeded in silence.

Custom had inured Skimpole to the uncongenial atmosphere, and he ate his tea quite contentedly. Squabbles and bickerings were always going on between Gore and Mellish, and they had the merit of diverting the attention of the pair from himself, and the monotony of silence was preferable to listening to the harsh voice of the cad of St. Jim's.

After having finished his tea and cleared up Skimpole's pot of jam, Gore returned to his position on the hearthrug, and rustled the pages of "Tom Merry's Weekly," while the amateur Socialist cleared the table.

Mellish shirked his share by pretending to be very busy with his prep. For a brief spell Mellish had thrown over his allegiance to Gore, but he had soon succumbed again, and now he was as great a toady to the elder boy as ever, and always ready to lend a hand in any trick that did not seem likely to prove dangerous to himself.

Skimpole carefully placed the empty jampot in the cupboard, and seated himself at his table again.

"Look here!" exclaimed Gore, turning suddenly. "Why don't you start a paper?"

"What?" gasped Mellish.

"Not you, fathead!" said Gore, with a sniff. "You couldn't start a sewing-machine, let alone a weekly."

"Who—who then? Not—"

Gore frowned, and then seeing signs of rebellion on Mellish's face, smiled significantly, and jerked his thumb in the direction of Skimpole.

"You, I mean!" he shouted.

The amateur Socialist looked up with surprise.

"Did you speak to me, Gore?"

The cad of St. Jim's bottled up his rising indignation, and grinned.

"Yes, of course I did, Skimmy. I've been turning over what you said before tea, and I think you're quite right. I think you ought to let others know your views."

Skimpole brightened up.

"I do try, but they won't listen," he said, with a regretful sigh.

Mellish stuffed his handkerchief into his mouth, and Gore turned a grin into a grimace. Not a very difficult feat for him.

"Well," he went on, after a pause, "if I had your ideas, I'd jolly well make the chaps listen. That's why I suggested starting a paper."

"A weekly?"

"Why not?"

"Of course, I know that a chap with my great intellect ought to be able to do a great deal of good," said Skimpole, fairly started on his favourite topic. "But I don't see how I can possibly start a paper. There's already a weekly, and, besides—"

"Oh, that's nothing!" interrupted Gore airily. "You'll clear the board with a chap like you as editor. Merry's rag won't stand an earthly. Why, the chaps'll be jolly glad to subscribe to your paper, if only for the sake of a change! And look at the good you can do—I may as well lay it on thick, he thought to himself. "Why, I shouldn't be surprised if you convinced half St. Jim's that Socialism and—all the rest of it is the only thing worth having! Why, all the big men have had to run papers. You can explain things so much better by writing than you can by jawing. Can't you?"

The amateur Socialist was a bit bewildered by Gore's flow of words, and he removed his spectacles and polished them carefully.

The cad of St. Jim's leaned back in his chair, surprised at



"Hallo, what are you up to?" Skimpole turned round, with his brush in the air. At that moment the door opened. "My eye!" gasped Tom Merry.

his own burst of fluency, and Mellish eyed him with something like admiration in his eyes.

Skimpole's very simplicity prevented him from suspecting anything, and he appeared to be rather taken with the idea. After a long pause, he looked up.

"I think it a very good suggestion, Gore; but why don't you start a paper yourself?"

Gore looked startled.

"Oh, I haven't time! Besides, I'm not cut out for that kind of thing. You have the whole subject at your fingers' ends; besides, I haven't half the brains you have," he added, as a clincher.

"No, of course not," agreed Skimpole reflectively, and without the least suspicion of offence.

The cad of St. Jim's glared at this, but managed to control himself.

Mellish grinned with delight.

"No, of course you haven't," he echoed, unable to forgo the joy of riling Gore with impunity. "Go on, don't scowl at me like that!" he muttered. "I'm only helping the wheeze along."

"Are you?" growled Gore. "Well, you be careful, or I'll help you along with my boot!"

Blissfully unconscious of this little bit of byplay, Skimpole pondered deeply. The idea was really great, and in his mind's eye he saw "Herbert Skimpole, Editor," written in big type right across the first page. He was always dreaming of the day when he would publish his famous book, but his highest flights of imagination had never soared to a paper of his own. There was something irresistibly fascinating in the idea, and he nearly trembled with excitement

as he thought of how he would wield his pen in the great cause.

Gore sat silent and watchful.

"I should like to very much," said Skimpole, at last, wrenching himself away from his delightful dream.

"But—"

"But what?"

"The expense!"

"Why, that's nothing!" exclaimed Gore. "You'll get the cost of the printing and so on back on the first number. There's a heap of money to be made in a weekly—I'm sure there is. I bet Merry and the others get a nice picking," he went on glibly.

"You could save the profits for your book," put in Mellish.

Skimpole nodded, but there were signs of wavering in his manner. He was thinking of the few pounds he had saved, and he knew that if he lost what little he had, he would not get any more. The amateur Socialist was generous to a fault, but his people were not by any means rich, and his supply of cash was very limited and uncertain.

Gore and Mellish exchanged glances. The former looked savage, and the latter cudgelled his brains in vain for a brilliant suggestion.

"I thought you were so taken up with your theories on Socialism," remarked Gore, with a slight sneer, "that you would not mind a little expense. You're bound to get your tin back, and a bit more."

"I don't want to make money," said Skimpole, a feeling of disappointment stealing over him.

"Well, look here!" cried Gore suddenly. "I've got a good idea. Try the first number typed, and see how it goes!"

"That's a good wheeze!" seconded Mellish. "There you are, the thing's as good as done!"

"But I haven't got a typewriter," objected Skimpole.

"That's easily managed!" cried Gore. "You leave it to me. I'll see to that for you. I'll go now. You get out the programme for the first number."

"But—"

"No buts!" exclaimed Gore. "You're the editor, you know, so we'll leave you to think matters over. Coming, Mellish?"

The word "editor" charmed the ears of the amateur Socialist as soft music charmeth away dull care, and the pair left him gazing before him in a trance of delight.

"What a silly, chump-headed ass he is!" chuckled Gore, as they walked down the passage. "I never came across such a simple idiot in all my life! Fancy him being the editor of a weekly! Bah!"

"What have you been kidding him for, then?" inquired Mellish. "What's the wheeze?"

"Don't you know?"

"N-no, I don't," admitted Mellish reluctantly.

"Well, of all the thick-headed chumps, you take the bun!"

"Oh, do I?" grunted Mellish huffily.

"What's Tom Merry done?" whispered Gore.

Mellish stared, then gave a cackle of delight.

"You're a marvel! My eye, won't they be wild! A rival paper! What-ho!"

"Shut up!" hissed Gore. "D'you want all the blessed school to know?"

There was a savage glint in the cad's eye, and Mellish kept his mouth shut tight, and breathed through his nose till they reached the gates of the old college.

"Where are you going to get a typewriter from, Gore?"

"Oh, old thingummyjig, the stationer's got one for hire! I'll ask him to send it up in the morning."

"How much will he charge?"

"Don't know, and don't care," replied Gore, in his usual surly tone. "On second thoughts, we had better bring it with us. We don't want that Merry crowd nosing round."

"I—I had better skip back!" exclaimed Mellish suddenly.

"I've got an impot to do. I'd forgotten—"

"No, you don't, you beauty!" snapped Gore, grabbing his partner by the collar. "I know your little dodge! You want to get out of carrying the beastly thing!"

Mellish protested vigorously, but Gore was adamant, and with his arm linked firmly in the other's, proceeded to the village.

They presented the aspect of bosom friends, and no one chancing to pass would have guessed that resentment, all the greater because of its suppression, burned fiercely in the heart of the smaller boy.

For the sum of ten-and-sixpence weekly Gore secured the machine, and they carried it off in triumph.

"He, he, he!" chuckled Mellish, with impish glee, as they lugged the case along between them. "He, he, he! That was a smart wheeze, getting it on tick, and entering it up to Skimmy!"

"Well, you didn't expect I was going to pay for it, did you? Skimpole ought to think himself jolly lucky that I've taken the trouble to get it," said Gore virtuously.

"Right-ho!"

With the exercise of a little cautious strategy, the pair managed to reach the study unobserved, and Skimpole peered at the tin case with mingled delight and astonishment.

"This is very good of you, Gore. I—"

"Don't you bother about that," replied Gore. "Have you thought out the—the policy of the weekly? Of course, you'll go hot and strong for the rival rag?"

Skimpole was about to reply, when a warning hiss came from Mellish.

"Dane's coming!"

"But that—"

"Yes, it does," said Gore sharply. "Here, you get to your table! Don't you see we've got to keep this dark until the first number's out? Sharp!"

The amateur Socialist gazed longingly at the typewriter, but obeyed Gore's gesture, and when Clifton Dane came in, the typewriter was safely tucked away under some papers in the bottom of the cupboard, and the study presented its usual aspect.

For the rest of the evening Skimpole fidgeted about, but Dane worked steadily at his prep. until bedtime, so there was no further chance to discuss the new paper.

CHAPTER 5.

The Triangle Raid—First Move!

RAIN, rain, rain!

"Nice sort of half, this!" grumbled Jack Blake, the following afternoon. "If it was a fine day, we could go for a spin."

"If ifs and ands," commented Digby, drumming with his knuckles on the table, "there'd be no work for—"

"There'll be a nice, fat, thick ear for someone," said Blake, turning away from the streaming window-pane, "if that someone quotes ragged old proverbs on a wet afternoon."

"We ought to get up a wag on Tom Mewwy & Co.," said Arthur Augustus.

"All right, we'll start on you!" exclaimed Herries.

"You put your tie straight, Gussy," said Jack Blake.

"How many times have I got to tell you?"

"Oh, wats!"

"That's not a bad wheeze, though," said Digby. "I think we ought to get our own back for the mouldy trick they played off last night."

"Wathah! I can't comprehend how you could have been so utterly silly as to be taken in by a trick like that!"

"No, of course, you would have spotted the wheeze at once!"

"Wathah!"

"Rubbish!"

"It's not wubbish! I—"

"Dry up!" cried Blake. "If we're going to rag Tom Merry and his crew, we'd better make a start right away! What shall we do?"

"Let's pounce in on the wottahs, and wumple them up!" exclaimed the Swell of St. Jim's.

"Wum—rumple them up?"

"Wathah! A jolly big wag!"

"Oh, ring off, Gussy! You're joking! Who's going to hold them—you?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Digby. "I can fancy our Gussy tackling Tom Merry with one hand, Monty with the other, and Manners with his left ear!"

"Your wibaldwy is vewwy wude, Digby, an' I shall wufuse to assist you in the wag if you don't stop wotting."

"For goodness' sake chuck it, Digby!" exclaimed Jack Blake, in a voice of alarm. "If Gussy drops out, we shall be absolutely done in! We couldn't possibly tackle Tom Merry & Co. without Gussy! Oh, dear, no!"

"Bai Jove, I—"

"What shall it be?" interrupted Herries. "Got any ideas?"

"I think mine was a wippin' whee—"

"You'll get a whipping if you don't dry up."

"I absolutely wufuse to dwy up. I—"

"Will you ring off?" roared Blake. "Look here, if you don't keep quiet, I'll—I'll jump on your beastly hatbox, and squash up your best topper! Going to ring off?"

Arthur Augustus rang off, and the three discussed the proposed rag.

"Well, I don't know!" exclaimed Jack Blake at last. "Every blessed thing I've suggested you've chucked out."

"Well, you must admit all you've suggested has been jolly old and rotten," said Digby.

"I don't admit anything of the kind," retorted Blake. "Trot out some new idea, then, since you're so mighty clever."

Digby stuck his hands in his pockets, and glanced at the ceiling reflectively.

"Right-ho!"

A minute passed, and the junior turned his attention to the window.

"Well," exclaimed Blake, at last, "shall we call again tomorrow, or next week?"

Digby cast a withering glance at his chum.

"How can a chap think, if you keep interrupting? I had just got something then; it's gone now!"

"Something like the lost chord?" inquired Herries.

"Please remember it's not an opera you're trying to think out, but a rag!"

Digby turned on his heel and walked to the window.

Arthur Augustus stifled a yawn, and sat down.

"May as well make ourselves comfortable," said Jack Blake, following the swell of St. Jim's example. "Suppose we have a game of patience, Herries, while Dig is thinking?"

Digby at the window thought hard. He was on his mettle, and presently he started a doleful whistling.

The chums stood the horrible dirge for a while, and then a well-aimed cushion sent the thinking one's nose against the cold, damp window.

"You—you are a silly ass, Blake!" yelled the indignant junior. "You made me bang my beastly nose! I was just thinking out such a ripping idea!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Who nose what it was?"

Digby glared at Herries.

"Why don't you adopt my ideah?" said D'Arcy. "It was wippin—"

"Adopt me grandmother! Here, I've had enough of this!" interrupted Blake. "Let's raid their study! After all, there's nothing new under the sun, but I dare say we can manage to introduce some new wheeze! Come on, Digby! Chuck thinking, and do something useful!"

Digby was not sorry to give up, although he did his best to keep up an injured air.

"All right. Shall we start wight away?"

"Come back, you image!" roared the leader of Study 6, as Arthur Augustus started for the door. "This thing's got to be done in the proper fashion! How do you know if they're in, or out?"

"Bai Jove, I—"

"Yes, I know, you'd jolly well run your head into a noose if it wasn't for me! You have a squint round, Dig, and see how the land lays."

Digby departed, and while he was gone on his searching expedition, Blake raked out the study toolbox.

"Of course, the hammer's gone!" he muttered.

"What do you want the hammer for?" inquired Herries.

"Where is it?"

"I don't know."

"D'you, Gussy?"

"Bai Jove, no! I don't wequiah a beastly hammah!"

"Well, I must have it!" cried Blake. "I wish to goodness you chaps wouldn't be so beastly untidy! One of you must have had it."

"I never had it," declared Herries. "Why, you had it yourself! Don't you remember you had it for knocking up that shelf? Why, here you are! Talk about being untidy! I should like to know who's the untidy one, now!"

Jack Blake had left the hammer on the shelf, and he grinned as Herries handed it over with a triumphant smile.

"Thanks, Herries," he said unconcernedly. "I was wrong that journey; but still, you can take it as a warning for next time. Don't waste time jawing; help me fish out some nails."

"What for?"

"You wait till your uncle tells you," said Blake.

Herries sniffed, but after a while lent himself to the task of turning out the bottom of the toolbox.

"Is this the sort of thing you want?" he asked, holding up a piece of iron about five inches long.

"Goodness, no!" exclaimed Blake. "I'm not going to build a beastly fence! Let's have something about half as long as D'Arcy's nose."

The swell of St. Jim's glared indignantly.

"I absolutely—"

"Nails!" cried Blake. "Nails! Come and look for nails, and don't stand there! Come on, you image!"

Arthur Augustus looked inclined to argue the point, but in the common cause he bent his aristocratic knees, and assisted them in the search. Between the difficulties of maintaining an air of dignity and preventing his monocle from falling out, the swell of St. Jim's was some time before he succeeded in finding his first nail.

"Bai Jove!" he exclaimed, holding up a battered specimen. "How would this do, deah boy?"

"That's all right!" grunted Herries. "Sit on it!"

The junior's remark proved to be the last straw, and, nothing loth, the swell of St. Jim's got to his feet and tenderly brushed down the knees of his trousers. This accomplished, he was about to vent his opinion of Herries, when he was interrupted by the entrance of Digby.

"It's all right!" exclaimed the amateur scout. "All's clear. They're not in their study."

"Oh!" said Blake. "Where are they, then?"

"How should I know?" replied Digby. "All I know is that their study is empty."

"You're a fine chap to reconnoitre!" exclaimed the leader of Study 6, rising from the toolbox, and collecting the nails. "The duty of a scout is not only to find out if the enemy has gone, but also where he has gone to. Still, it's no good wasting any more time, so we'll chance it. Stick that hammer in your pocket, Herries, and try and look a little less like a wicked conspirator."

Firmly convinced in their own minds that their demeanour was perfectly unsuspicious, the four juniors strolled along the corridor to Study 1.

Jack Blake, as leader, boldly turned the handle of the door of the sacred sanctum, and, followed by the others, marched in.

"H'm!" muttered Blake, as he looked round. "Quite spick and span! Quite a comfy little study. We must see what a little rearrangement of the furniture will do. Hang on to that picture, Gussy!" he went on, pointing to a portrait of Tom Merry. "I think that would look a great deal better the other way up!"

With the aid of a chair, the swell of St. Jim's carried out the suggestion.

"Bai Jove!" he grumbled, as he unfixed the portrait. "The back of the beastly thing is covered with dust. I don't think when we start on a wag that we ought to endangah our own clothes."

"Never mind," said Digby cheerfully, as he emptied the contents of the coal-scuttle into the middle of the hearthrug. "It's all in a good cause."

Arthur Augustus sniffed indignantly, and as he turned to remonstrate with his chum, his foot slipped, and he came crashing to the ground.

"You—you—your silly ass!" exclaimed Blake, turning from his pleasant employment of removing all the ornaments on the mantelpiece to the empty coal-scuttle. "D'you want to raise an alarm? Can't you turn a picture over without kicking up all that beastly row? You are a clumsy beggar!"

This scant sympathy thoroughly upset the even temper of the one and only, and his drawl was more pronounced than ever as he expressed his opinion of Jack Blake, in slow and dignified phrases. But, finding that he might just as well talk to the desert air for all the notice the juniors paid to him, Arthur Augustus at last seated himself in the only available chair, and watched the proceedings.

Certainly the study, the pride of the Terrible Three, already presented a changed—a very changed—aspect. Of real damage there was none, but in the short space of time that they had spent in the study, Blake and his active partners had very well succeeded in turning things upside down. A little variety was introduced by the cautious use of the hammer and nails, and the wall over the mantelpiece was tastefully decorated with the fireirons.

"I think," said Blake, eyeing the fireplace critically, "that a little drapery would somewhat improve the appearance of the mantelpiece, don't you?"

"Yes," replied Herries, with his head on one side. "The paint is a bit worn. I should think a pair of curtains would be an improvement!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Digby gave his contribution to the furtherance of the idea by clambering nimbly up on to the window-sill, and removing the curtains with a care worthy of a better object, handed them gleefully to Blake and Herries.

"Don't quite see how we're goin' to fix these," said Blake.

"I know!" exclaimed Digby. "Shove a couple of ginger-beer bottles on the mantelpiece, that'll keep 'em from slipping."

This was soon done, and Blake put an artistic finishing touch by looping up the new decoration with an old pair of braces and a tin-tack on the one side, and the table-cloth on the other.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed D'Arcy, his good humour quite restored. "I considah that a wippin' ideah. I—"

"Hallo, you woke up?" inquired Blake.

"Yes, wathah! I think we might play some twick with that book-case."

"M'yes, we might," said Blake. "Of course, we could up-end it, or chop it up into little bits. Haven't you got any better idea than that, Gussy?"

"I tell you what!" exclaimed Herries. "Suppose we shove the thing in front of the window."

"Heave-oh, then!" agreed Jack Blake. "Mind your nose, Gussy. There, you hang on to this end. Never mind the dust, and Herries and Dig can collar the other. Now!"

Now it was, for Herries and Digby gave such a vigorous heave that a dismal howl came from Arthur Augustus, and

the bookcase tilted back, the glass doors flew open, and a shower of books and dust rained on his head.

"Hold hard!" gasped Blake, red in the face with the strain.

"Don't let go, Gussy!"

D'Arcy, although he was angry and indignant, hung on like grim death, and the heavy piece of furniture was safely negotiated to an upright position again.

Gasping and grunting like thirsty removal men, the four juniors staggered and heaved and pushed, and at last succeeded in transferring the bookcase to its suggested position.

It effectually blocked up the window, and the study was cast in gloom.

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus, dusty, and with beads of perspiration on his noble brow. "Bai Jove, that's wippin'!"

The swell of St. Jim's was so delighted with his unusual efforts as a strong man, that he quite forgot for the time his dishevelled and dusty condition.

"Not so bad!" muttered Jack Blake.

"It's jolly dark," said Herries. "Hadn't we better cut now? I don't think there's anything more we can do, is there?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"No, I really think that is all," commented Digby, peering round in the dark.

"I should like to see their faces when they come in," chuckled Jack Blake. "This'll teach them to kid us we're going to have tea with them: Ha, ha, ha!"

"This is where we laugh," added Herries.

The four emerged quietly from the scene of their little attentions, and when they came out into the daylight, they all burst out laughing.

"My eye, but you look as if you'd been rolling in the dustbin," roared Jack Blake. "And just look at Gussy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus surveyed his dusty clothing in dismay, and darted off.

"Not a bad idea, either!" exclaimed Herries. "If Merry and the others see us like this, they'll tumble, for sure. Let's have a wash, and get down to the gym, out of the way."

"Right-ho!"

CHAPTER 6.

The Triangle Raid—Second Move.

"CAVE!"

Without the slightest suspicion that three pairs of eyes were watching them from a recess near the bath-room, the chums of Study 6 went by unsuspectingly.

Luckily no word was passed between Blake, Herries, and Digby, but all the same the silent witnesses saw their condition, and greatly marvelled thereat.

"All clear!"

"Yes," whispered Tom Merry, peeping out of the recess, "all serene. I wonder what they've been up to?"

There was a slightly uneasy feeling in his mind, but Manners' remark quelled his suspicion.

"Been having a clear up," he said. "Tidying up their old study, I expect."

"About time," added Monty Lowther. "Listen!"

The sound of approaching footsteps reached their ears, and the three dodged nimbly back as the door of the bath-room opened.

"Going down now?" inquired the voice of Digby.

"May as well."

The chums of Study 6 safely out of sight and hearing, the Terrible Three burst into a fit of laughter.

"They're safe for a while, anyhow."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Monty Lowther seemed to be enjoying himself hugely.

Tom Merry stopped laughing, and looked at him inquisitively.

"What's up?" he demanded.

"Ha, ha, ha! I was just thinking what a lark it will be if they really have tidied up."

"Make our raid all the better."

"What do you think?"

"Rather! Coast clear. Have a look through that window, though, in case of an unpremeditated move."

"Oh, goodness, don't crack your jaw, Merry!" cried Manners, as he went to the corridor window. "Yes, they're crossing the quad. Going to the gym."

"Good! Forward! Quick march!"

Blissfully unconscious of the condition of their own study, the Terrible Three gleefully, and with many chuckles, made for Study 6.

"Don't look as if they'd been straightening up!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "What the dickens have they been doing with these tools?"

"Goodness alone knows! P'raps they've been nailing Gussy up."

"The place is pretty well upside down as it is!" exclaimed Monty Lowther. "I don't see that whatever we do, short of smashing up things, will make it much worse."

"Can't we think of something quite new?"

"What about carting all the stuff in our den?" suggested Manners.

"Silly ass!"

"Why?"

"Why? Why, where do you suppose we're going to put all their rubbish? Besides, they're bound to come along to us first."

"The box-room!" shouted Lowther.

"My eye!"

"Good idea. If we don't get spotted," said Tom Merry.

"Jolly good, in fact!"

"Thanks!" said Monty Lowther. "Praise from you is praise indeed!"

"Glad you appreciate the compliment, Monty," said Tom Merry, with a laugh. "Now, since we've decided what to do, we may as well start on the job."

"What shall we take first?"

"Let's conjure away the chairs first. Come on!"

The Terrible Three seized a chair apiece, and in less than one minute deposited them in the box-room, and returned to the study.

"One thing, we're not likely to be spotted!" exclaimed Tom Merry, grabbing the coal-scuttle in one hand, and the fender with the other. "Most of the chaps are in the gym, and we've got a clear field, for the next half-hour, anyway."

Manners followed with the fireirons and a set of boxing-gloves, and Lowther brought up the rear with a small table which he carried on his head.

A faint clicking sound could have been heard as they passed Skimpole's study, but the juniors were too intent on their jape to take any notice.

A succession of journeys disposed of every portable article of furniture, and there only remained a cupboard, which they decided to place behind the door, so that to anyone entering, the room would appear to be empty.

"What about the carpet?" exclaimed Manners.

"And the curtains?" continued Monty Lowther.

"Oh, we must take those," said Tom Merry, with a grin.

"My aunt! Won't they be surprised? Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if we can reach the curtains!" cried Manners.

"There's nothing to stand on!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'll give you a back," said Tom, suiting the action to the word.

"Ow! Be careful, fathead!"

"Did I hurt you?" inquired Manners, balancing himself by clutching at the window-frame.

"I should think so!" grumbled Tom Merry. "Sticking your beastly sharp knees into the small of my back! Ow, be careful!"

"Don't you worry," said Manners, calmly planting his boot on Tom's shoulder-blade. "I'm all right. There! There's one down!"

"Fathead! Ass!" came a muffled voice. "Atch—atchoo!"

"Ow! Wow! Keep—"

Manners had dropped the dusty curtain over Tom Merry's head, and he reaped the result of his action on the hard floor. He landed with a bump that shook the room.

The fall knocked all the breath out of the junior, and a yell came from Monty Lowther as the curtain pole gave way and came down with a whack on his head.

Tom Merry, enveloped in the curtain, cannoned into his shum backwards, and the pair rolled on the floor.

"Oh! Wow!"

"You fathead!"

"Oh, my head!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Terrible Three sat on the floor, laughed at one another, and rubbed the bruises ruefully.

"What in the world did you want to drop the beastly thing on my head for?"

"Why did you sneeze and make me fall?"

"What the policeman did you want to grab hold of the curtain for? I've got a bump on my head as big as an egg!" exclaimed Lowther.

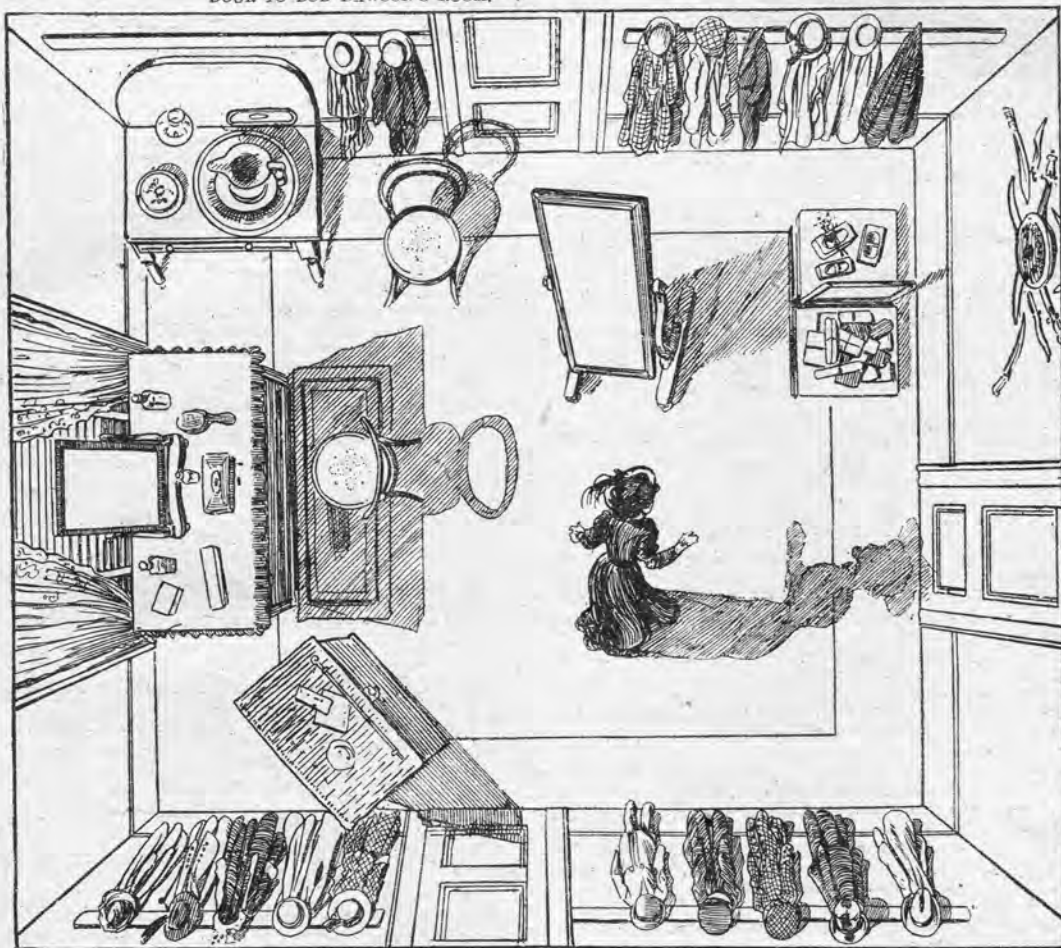
"Ha, ha, ha!"

Taking it all round, the bumps and bruises had been pretty evenly distributed, so there was not much cause for complaint on the score of one being a greater sufferer than the other.

"By Jove, though," cried Tom Merry, suddenly scrambling to his feet, "if we sit here much longer, old Blake and the others may come in, and it would be rather difficult to explain matters!"

"I should say so. Besides spoiling the most gorgeous wheeze that's ever been worked," added Manners. "Bundle up the curtains, and we'll vamoose."

DOOR TO BOB DAWSON'S ROOM. V



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"Not without the carpet," muttered Monty Lowther. "My eye, look at the dust! It can't be good for their delicate little chests to live in a place like this!"

"Look out!" cried Tom Merry. "Ow! Wow! Fathead!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He, he, he!"

Just as the chief of the Terrible Three had picked up the curtains and plumped them into Manners's arms, he stepped on to the edge of the slip of carpet, and as at that particular moment Lowther had gathered himself for a strong pull, the legs of Tom Merry went part of the way with the carpet, and after a brief spasmodic wriggle at a most unusual angle, his head met the hard boards with a crack that sent stars flitting before his eyes.

"I— Oh, I—I'm awfully sorry!" spluttered Lowther. "You see, I didn't for a moment—I didn't know—I thought you were by the window. Are you hurt?"

"Hurt!" snorted Tom Merry. "Oh, no! I'm as pleased as Punch!"

"I'm awfully— Ha, ha—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Manners also burst into a roar of laughter, and the next moment Tom Merry's cheery laugh joined in; but the danger of being suddenly invaded soon stopped their merriment, and the carpet was hastily rolled up.

"You're right about the d-d-dust! Atischoo! Atischoo!" sneezed Tom Merry. "Atischoo!"

"Atischoo!"

Sneezing, and with smarting eyes, the three carried the carpet to the door. Manners suddenly let his end go with a

yell, and a cloud of dust arose as the carpet banged on the floor.

"Ow!"

"Atischoo! Wa—wa—what's the matter?" exclaimed Monty Lowther. "W—what the dickens d'you want to drop it for?"

"Ah—ah—choo! So—so would you," spluttered Manners indignantly. "I've got a beastly tin-tack up my—my nail! Fathead! Ass!"

"Never mind about that now!" exclaimed Tom Merry cheerfully. "Stick your thumb in your mouth."

How can I suck my thumb and carry this beastly thing?" retorted the aggrieved junior indignantly. "I— At— atischoo!"

"Oh, well, stick the carpet in there instead, and carry your thumb! Ha, ha, ha!"

Manners grunted in disgust, but took up his end of the carpet again.

The last journey to the box-room was made, and in a happy and contented frame of mind, the Terrible Three, after carefully concealing the raided property of Study 6, descended the stairs and made for the quad.

CHAPTER 7.

The Triangle Raid—The Third Move.

"JUST look at it!" exclaimed Tom Merry, as they stood on the school step. "Just look at it! Fancy snow this time of the year!"

"Ugh!" grunted Manners. "It's rotten!"

"Parky," said Lowther, with a shiver. "Let's get up to our den and make up a jolly big fire."

"Not yet," replied Tom Merry, turning up his coat-collar. "We'll cut across to the gym first and see if Blake & Co. are there."

The three juniors sprinted across the sleet soaked quad., and burst into the door of the gymnasium.

Most of the Fourth-Formers were in the gym., but the Terrible Three at first saw no signs of Blake & Co.

"That's funny!" said Manners. "I wonder where—Hullo! There's one of them, anyhow!"

"Gussy!"

The swell of St. Jim's was languidly pulling himself up and down on the horizontal bar when the Terrible Three strolled up.

"Hullo, Gussy! Getting your biceps up?" inquired Tom Merry. "Where are the others?"

"Don't know, deah boy. I have been waitin' for them for the last hour or so. I went up to change, you know, and saw them cwoosing the quad."

"Went up to change?" queried Monty Lowther. "Why, you must be fond of changing your togs. Whatever d'you want to change for on a day like this?"

"Well, you see, deah boy, after the—the—" Arthur Augustus broke off in confusion. He suddenly remembered the state of the Terrible Three's study. "Oh, just for a change, deah boy!" he concluded lamely.

Tom Merry eyed the red face of D'Arcy narrowly.

"Just for a change, Gussy. I believe you've been up to some mischief!"

"No, no, not really!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "You see, I—we—"

"I—we— What the dickens is the matter with you?" demanded Monty Lowther. "Where are the others?"

"I believe they've gone to the bike shed," said Figgins, strolling up. "I heard Jack Blake say something about cleaning up his jigger. Dane's gone with him, too."

"Bai Jove, I must go!"

The swell of St. Jim's lost no time in quitting such inquisitive company, and walked off quickly.

Fatty Wynn gazed after him dolefully.

"Anybody would think Gussy a dainty titbit," said Manners. "What's the matter, Fatty? Hungry?"

"Yes," said the New House member. "This weather always gives me an appetite. I suppose you're not thinking of standing a feed, are you?"

"If it's anything like the tea last evening," interjected Figgins, "you won't get over much to eat."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Terrible Three laughed at the recollection.

Figgins sniffed disdainfully.

"Surely," he exclaimed, "you don't kid yourselves that was a jape, do you? Why, if we couldn't think of a better wheeze than that, we'd boil our heads."

"Better do it then," suggested Monty Lowther.

"Start on Fatty first," said Manners. "He'd make a first-class dumpling."

The leader of the New House and his chums strolled off.

"Ask Blake & Co to invite you to tea!" shouted Tom Merry.

"My aunt!" chuckled Manners. "Mind what you're about, or you'll give the game away."

"No fear!"

"Dunno so much about that!"

"Look here, it strikes me," exclaimed Tom Merry, as the gymnasium door closed on the New House Co.—"it strikes me that those three are getting a bit too high and mighty. Don't you think so?"

"I do," said Manners emphatically.

"So do I," added Lowther.

"That being the case," said Tom Merry, swinging his legs as he sat on the parallel bars, "it naturally follows that the mighty ones must forthwith receive a gentle reminder that they must not chuck their weight about too much."

"That's so."

"What can we do?"

"Can't very well cart all their furniture across the quad. to the box-room."

"No, we can't do that; but surely there's some other way of making them wish to hide their diminished heads?"

"What's the suggestion?"

"Don't know yet. Let's have a think."

For the next five minutes the chums cudgelled their heads for a bright inspiration worthy of themselves.

At last Tom Merry gave a grunt of disgust.

"Blessed if I can think of anything," he said.

"Neither can I."

"Why not make it a common or garden study raid?" said Lowther. "Surely not make it a goodnees we can introduce a little

novelty? Besides, Figgy & Co. have not had a call from us for ages."

"That's so," admitted Tom Merry. "Providing they are nowhere about we ought to make a pretty good show."

"Let's try, anyway," said Manners eagerly. "I'm frozen, and if we do get collared a dust up will warm us up a bit. A thick ear is better than a cold one. Come on!"

It is said that fortune favours the bold, and it certainly stood the chums in good stead that afternoon, for unnoticed, unchallenged, they entered the New House, and reached the door of Figgins & Co.'s study without let or hindrance.

"My eye!" muttered Monty Lowther, as they opened the door and entered. "This is what one may call luck, if you like!"

"Yes, almost too good to be true," replied Tom Merry. "Well, since the luck's been with us so far, let's make the most of it. It would be positively ungrateful to the fates to chuck away a chance like this."

"So I should think!" exclaimed Manners. "Don't you consider fires are very bad for New House chaps? Makes them delicate, you know."

"Yes, certainly," said Lowther. "In their own interests I really think we ought to put it out, don't you?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The kettle comes in very handy!" said Tom Merry, pouring a liberal dose of water over the carefully-banked up fire. Phew!"

A cloud of steam and dust came gushing from the devastated hearth, and Manners flew to the window.

"That's right!" exclaimed Tom Merry, wiping the dust from his eyes. "Better leave it wide open. Fresh air is good, you know. It's good for lots of things, so I dare say it will cure their swelled noddles."

"B-r-r-r!"

"Yes, it's cold; but still, Monty, in the cause of pity and so on," cried Tom Merry—"well, we just—what you call it—ourselves on the altar of—of—Hullo! Just look here!"

The Terrible Three gathered round the cupboard door that Tom Merry had just opened.

"A new pot of strawberry jam!" cried Lowther.

"A half-opened tin of sardines!"

"Half a dozen cold sausages!"

"Very bad for kids!"

"Yes, awful bad!"

"In the cause of justice, what do we do?"

"Confiscate!"

"No, that won't do. We don't confiscate; we amalgamate!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

With chuckles of delight, the work of amalgamation proceeded rapidly. A hole was made in the jam, and a sardine was interred therein and carefully concealed. The sausages were carefully cut open, hollowed out, and filled with the jam that had been taken out of the pot to make room for the sardine. Everything was then carefully replaced, and the cupboard door closed.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He, he, he! Oh, my eyes! What a scrumptious wheeze!"

The chums roared with laughter.

"I really think," said Tom Merry, at length, "that we have done our duty, and can now retire."

"In other words—bunk!" retorted Manners. "A jape like this is worthy of a good finish, so let's went with all possible dispatch, as they say in the advertisements."

"Our luck's certainly in!" exclaimed Tom Merry, as they left the New House. "Why, I believe we could raid the Head's study, and—"

"You try!" said Lowther grimly. "Not for this child. Two raids in one afternoon are quite enough. My word, won't there be wailing and gnashing of teeth when Blake and Figgy return to their little nests! Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER 8.

"The Alarm," Edited by Herbert Skimpole.

LICK, click! Ting!

During the whole of that afternoon, while Blake & Co. had been busy in Tom Merry's study and the Terrible Three had been likewise employed in Study 6 and the New House, the study—or, rather, the office—of the new paper had presented an unusual appearance.

From the time Dane had left, soon after dinner, Skimpole had been busily tapping the keys of the hired typewriter, and Gore and Mellish had been spoiling paper in the fancy that they were undiscovered journalists.

Tap, tap, click!

Skimpole's skinny fingers descended at irregular intervals on the keys of the machine, and a variation, to Gore's heavy

breathing, as he bent laboriously over his writing-pad, sounded as the carriage pursued its jerky course to the end of the line, and the bell went. Ting!

The cad of St. Jim's threw down his pen and scowled at Skimpole.

"How much have you done?" he demanded.

The amateur Socialist lifted the carriage and peered at his work.

"I—I've only done half a page," he muttered. "You see, I want practice. I am not used to the keyboard yet. Once I have the position of the keys firmly impressed on my mind I have no doubt that—"

"You've no doubt!" snorted Gore, as he rose from his chair and bent over the typewriter. "Why, what in the world d'you call this? Is it Chinese, Pekinese, or what? Why, a printer would never be able to make head or tail of that rubbish! It looks to me as if a cat had been crawling over the keys. Besides, we must get the paper out by Saturday, and, at the rate you're going, it'll take you about ten years."

The editor of the newspaper passed his hand wearily over his bumpy forehead. He had been pounding at the typewriter till the little black keys, with their white letters, danced before his aching eyes, and his fatigue, coupled with the worry of thinking out subjects and answering the questions of Gore and Mellish, had reduced him to a state bordering on collapse.

He had slept but little the night before, and his dazed brain refused to work with its accustomed ease and quickness.

"I think I had better rest a little," he said.

"Rest!" snapped Gore. "Why, an editor's not supposed to rest. Why, you haven't done half as much as I have! Why, you couldn't even think of a good name!"

"It's not a bad title," said the editor.

"Not bad. I should think not, indeed. Why, it's just the thing. Think how fine it will look—'The Alarum' in big letters, right across the top, and underneath, edited by Sherbert—Herbert, I mean, Skimpole. He, he, he!"

Gore chuckled at his feeble joke, and went on complacently:

"Tell you what, Skimmy. I could do a jolly funny column. I—"

A splutter came from Mellish at the table.

"I said I could do a jolly funny column," repeated Gore, with eyes fixed on the junior.

"Yes—oh, yes!" agreed Skimpole sadly. "To be sure. Will you write it now? I think I'll give up typing for a time. I'll get on with my article on 'The Degeneration of the Fourth.' I can do it quicker writing—"

"All right," said Gore. "I shan't do any more writing just now. Mellish and I will have a stroll round. It's a bit of a fog scribbling. I shouldn't care to have to make a living writing for a beastly newspaper. It's all right for fun. While we're gone you can have a look through that article I've written. Show that typewriter in the cupboard, in case Dane should come in."

After the departure of Gore and Mellish, the editor of "The Alarum" slowly recovered his calm view of things. It certainly was a fine thing to have a paper of one's own, he reflected, and no doubt after a while it would come easier.

For upwards of half an hour his pen flew over the paper, and he revelled in the thought of his views being circulated all through the college. Then he bethought himself of Gore's contribution, and gathered up the scattered sheets.

"I wish he had put numbers on the pages," he muttered to himself, as he gazed perplexedly from one ungainly-written page to another. "Ah, I suppose this is the commencement!"

For a time, Skimpole studied the words with a puzzled frown, and then slowly and laboriously he began to piece the words into sentences.

"Dear me!" he murmured. "This is a most extraordinary composition. This cannot be intended for 'The Alarum.' As editor I most strongly object to this sort of thing. Dear me! It is nothing more than a libel on all the Fourth, and the writer seems to be particularly venomous—dear me!—against Tom Merry & Co."

The amateur editor had almost forgotten who was the writer of the article, and it only gradually dawned upon his scientific mind that between Gore and the famous Co. there was very little friendship lost.

"This will never do," he mused aloud. "It is positively rude and abusive."

Skimpole shuffled the sheets of paper together abstractedly. He was thinking of Tom Merry & Co., and while he knew that Tom Merry, and all the others, came to that, laughed at his views, he was also aware that upon more than one occasion the Terrible Three had gone out of their way to do him a good turn.

Of course, he reflected, it was their way to do a chap a good turn and play tricks with him the next moment, but

it did not seem to be quite playing the game to abuse them in the terms used by Gore in his article.

The first page of the article lay on the table, and the editor shook his head as he read it over again. It was headed: "The Bounders of the Fourth," and all the way down the page such words as cads, outsiders, rotters, and so on figured on every line. Tom Merry & Co. were referred to as "The Terrible Triplets" and "The Tiresome Three," and accused of the perpetration of every low-down trick that could be thought of.

Skimpole was still shaking his head when Gore and Mellish returned.

"Hallo! Done your work?"

"Yes."

"What d'you think of my article?" inquired Gore, with a sidelong glance.

"Well, I don't think it quite suitable," said Skimpole.

"What!" howled the cad of St. Jim's. "You don't think it quite suitable? What d'you mean? It's a fine, rousing article. I bet it will wake some of them up."

"But it isn't true," objected Skimpole.

"Rubbish!" retorted Gore. "What d'you know about it? It's as true as the stuff you write, anyhow."

"As editor of 'The Alarum,'" said Skimpole, with an air of dignity, "I refuse to accept your article."

The cad of St. Jim's stared at the amateur Socialist in amazement.

Mellish indulged in a cautious snigger.

"You—you refuse to accept what I have written?"

"I regret," said Skimpole, with an air of finality; "but it is unsuitable."

Gore flushed a dusky red, and he looked as if he would wipe the floor with the editor of "The Alarum"; but, with an effort, he restrained his impulse.

"All right," he grunted. "Have it your own way."

Skimpole bowed, and accepted the reply quite naturally.

Mellish stared, and thought it anything but natural. He did not see as far as his partner, and he did not realise as Gore did that if Skimpole resigned or backed out of the position of editor, all the wrath of the Terrible Three would descend upon their own heads.

Gore picked up his rejected article, and slipped it into his pocket.

A look of comprehension flashed into Mellish's eyes, and he grinned knowingly.

"Shall we have tea?" inquired Skimpole, looking up from his little table.

"Not yet," said Gore. "We've got one or two little matters to settle first."

The editor blinked inquiry through his big spectacles.

"It's like this," said Gore. "We've got to come to some arrangement about this weekly. I'm not going to complain. You've got a perfect right, as editor, to reject anything you like."

Skimpole beamed, and the vindictive look in the cad's eyes quite escaped his notice.

"It's like this," went on Gore. "We've arranged to get this out by Saturday, and there's nothing ready yet."

"No; quite quite!"

"Nothing like ready. Look here! Will you leave the arrangements with me, and I'll see that everything is done. I'll get the same printer that does the Merry rag to print us a cover cheap, and the rest of the pages you can get typed and copied. It won't cost much, and we must make some sort of a splash over the first number."

"But the cost. I—"

"Oh, don't bother about that now!" exclaimed Gore. "Cost! Why, it can't be much—a few shillings!"

"But—"

"Now, look here, Skimmy! Don't you keep on putting things in the way. Are we going to bring out 'The Alarum,' or not?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Very well, then. I'll fix it with the printer, and you get the rest of the copy ready for typing."

Skimpole demurred, and Gore argued, and finally the one with the biggest voice won, and the question of producing "The Alarum" was left in his hands, the matter of money being carefully kept in the background.

CHAPTER 9.

The Raiders Meet

WALLY, D'Arcy's young brother, came whistling round the corner of the bicycle-shed. Wally never had the blues, and the rain and the sleet made no difference to his lively temperament. Nothing could damp the spirits of the younger D'Arcy.

"Hi!"

Wally came to a stop.

"Hi—!"

Freddy Kerr, and Fatty Wynn emerged from the scant shelter of the projecting roof.

"Seen Blake?" inquired Figgins.

"Nope!"

"Seen your brother?"

"Nope. Anything else?"

"No!" growled the long-legged member of the New House. "Clear!"

"Right!"

Wally cheerfully resumed his whistle and his walk.

"They're either gone to the tuckshop or the study," said Kerr.

"Which shall we try?"

"Tuckshop!" exclaimed Fatty Wynn.

"Of course, you'd be bound to say that," said Figgins.

"What d'you say, Kerr?"

"Oh, I don't care! I'm not particular, anyway. Let's try the study first."

"Study it is, then."

Tom Merry & Co. were standing in the entrance-hall when the New House juniors came in.

"Seen Blake?" inquired Figgins.

"No," replied Tom Merry. "What do you New House bounders want here?"

"Pax!" exclaimed Figgins. "We're going up to Blake's study."

"All right then," said Manners, with a grin. "No tricks, you know."

"Don't you worry your little selves," rejoined Figgins, as they went up the staircase. "It's pax, you know."

"What a lark!" muttered Monty Lowther. "What a lark it would be if old Blake and his crew were to come along now. My eye!"

"My eye it is," whispered Tom Merry. "Here they come, sure enough. The whole blessed lot. I suppose the pangs of hunger have drawn them. Hallo, Blake!"

"Seen Figgins?" inquired Jack Blake. "Young Wally told us they've been inquiring for us."

"They've gone upstairs to your den," said Lowther, with a grin. "You'd better hurry up."

"What for?" demanded Blake.

"Oh, nothing! But you never know, you know."

"No, you don't," snapped Digby. "If those bounders get up to any tricks in our study we shall hold you responsible."

"Go hon!" cried Manners. "We made it pax, you know."

"Only for us," said Tom Merry.

Blake & Co. did not wait for any more, but went up the stairs three at a time.

Figgins & Co. had entered the dismantled study.

"Here—I—what's this?" had exclaimed the astounded Figgins. "We've made a mistake!"

The three gazed openmouthed at the empty study.

"It's empty!" cried Kerr rather unnecessarily.

"That's funny!" gasped Fatty Wynn, with his eyes bulging out of his head.

"Mighty funny!" said Figgins. "We'd better clear out of this, or—"

The three looked at one another with startled eyes. The sound of running footsteps could be heard, and the next moment Jack Blake bounded into the room.

"Oh!"

The leader of Study 6 was dumbfounded.

Digby came running in next.

"Oh!"

On the heels of Digby came Herries.

"Oh-o-oh!"

There was a pause, and then Arthur Augustus strolled in leisurely.

"Bai-Jove!"

"Where's our furniture?" howled Jack Blake.

Figgins & Co. edged towards the door.

"Collar them!" cried Digby.

"Bai Jove, wathah!"

"Chuck it!" shouted Figgins, backing hastily. "We don't know anything about it."

"How long have you been here?"

"Only a minute—just before you came."

"Honest Injun?"

"Honest Injun!"

"Well, this beats all," said Blake, staring at the bare floor, bare wall, the curtainless window.

"Where can the stuff be?" cried Digby. "It can't have gone out of the window!"

"Somebody's waided it!" said Arthur Augustus.

"No; not really, Gussy! You must be dreaming!" observed Herries, in the vein sarcastic.

"But—"

"Who's done it?" shouted Blake, stamping about.

"Goodness alone knows!" muttered Digby.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins burst into a roar of laughter.

"The Gem" Library, No. 59.

Kerr and Wynn joined in, and Blake & Co. began to look very warlike.

"What the dickens are you cackling about?" demanded Jack Blake. "We haven't a blessed stick left! This is beyond a joke!"

"Well, we'd better be getting back to tea," said Figgins, rather unkindly. "Sorry for you chaps; but, of course, if you can't keep your own furniture in your own study, it's not our fault!"

"Get out!" howled Jack Blake. "Get, or—"

The chums of the New House got out, and their laughter echoed down the passage.

"Do you think Gore would have dared—" commenced Digby.

"No, I don't!" snapped Blake. "We've been had!"

"Why, you don't think Tom—"

"Yes, I do; they must have spotted our little game, and—What's all that row?"

Blake & Co. rushed in a body to the door.

A series of startled exclamations came from Study 1.

Tom Merry & Co. had come up, and were learning the truth of the old saying about the biter being bitten, and were wrathfully examining the state of their study.

"May as well go and look on," said Jack Blake.

"They evidently didn't spot us, then," muttered Digby.

"Couldn't have done, or they'd have been along to see us."

"Bai Jove, I wondah if they have collahed our beastly things!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Bai Jove, this is wotten! A wotten twick!"

"Well, you're in a nice mess!" said Jack Blake, as they halted outside the door of the Terrible Three's study.

"What have you been doing?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Herries.

"He, he, he!" echoed Digby.

"It's all very well for you to laugh!" cried Tom Merry. "Look at our study!"

"Just what we're doing!" said Blake. "It does look a bit strange!"

"So will you if you don't look out!" said Manners.

"Where's my camera?" howled Monty Lowther. "Oh, here it is!"

The junior examined his precious camera carefully, and gave a grunt of satisfaction when he found it was quite uninjured.

"What are you four staring at?" demanded Tom Merry suddenly.

"We want our things!" said Jack Blake.

"Your things?"

"Yes, our furniture!"

"We haven't got your furniture!" replied Tom Merry, with a bright twinkle in his eyes that did not escape the notice of Jack Blake. "We haven't got them—have we, Manners?"

"Of course, not!" grunted Manners, from the hearthrug.

"What should we want with them?"

"Here, you clear out of our study!" shouted Tom Merry.

"Turn 'em out!"

"Half a mo'!" said Jack Blake, advancing. "Come on, you chaps!"

For a moment the rivals eyed one another, and then there was a sudden rush.

Tom Merry and Jack Blake went whirling into the fender, clutched in one another's arms.

Digby and Herries piled on top of Manners, and Arthur Augustus tackled Monty Lowther.

Lowther struggled manfully under the sudden onslaught, then catching his foot in the hearthrug, went down with a bump on top of Merry and Blake.

"You wottah!" gasped the swell of St. Jim's triumphantly, and regardless of the fact that the toe of his boot was thrust into Blake's face. "Delivah up our things!"

"Gerroff!" shouted the muffled voice of Tom Merry.

"Get your foot out of my face!" howled Blake.

"Lemme gerrup!"

A sudden upheaval sent Arthur Augustus sprawling, and just as he scrambled to his feet Figgins & Co. burst in.

"Who's the bounder that put our fire out?"

"Ow!"

"Wow!"

The New House Co. had come prepared to avenge the raid on their study, and they laid about them with knotted handkerchiefs, regardless of whom they happened to punish, and on the principle of hit first and make inquiries afterwards.

Fatty Wynn was particularly active, and it is not improbable that the half sardine that he had popped into his mouth under the belief that it was a whole strawberry had something to do, with the vigour of his arm.

The uproar could have been heard all over the School House before, but with the advent of Figgins & Co. it travelled all over the college.



Before he knew where he was, the young editor was surrounded by a yelling mob of Third-Formers, and hustled in front of a board stuck in the ground.

Study 1 was a mass of struggling, squirming juniors.

"Who opened our window?"

"Who collared our furniture?"

"Take that!"

"You wottah!"

"Who raided our study?"

"Who filled our sausages with strawberry jam?"

Bang, bang, bang!

Bump! Whack! Bump!

"Ow! Wow! Boo!"

Doors began to open down the corridor, and the Fourth Form gathered in a dense crowd outside Study 1.

The corridor was packed.

The yells and bangs from within were deafened by the laughter without.

"Go it!"

"Sack 'em!"

"Boo, boo-oh!"

"Silence!"

A sudden hush fell on the crowd in the passage, but the din in the study continued with unabated vigour.

"What's all this?" demanded Mr. Railton, advancing through the crush.

"The Gem" Library, No. 59.

"Sure, sor, there's a bit ov a dust-up—a bit ov a row goin' on!" said Reilly.

"So I should say," replied Mr. Railton grimly. "Boys!"

Tom Merry was engaged in rubbing Jack Blake's nose on the hearthrug, but he stopped suddenly at the sound of the master's voice.

"Railton!" he muttered. "A lucky job for you!"

Tom Merry was not the only one that heard the sharp command, and hostilities ceased on the instant.

"What's the meaning of this?" demanded Mr. Railton, gazing at the dishevelled youngsters. "What are you doing here, Figgins?"

"You see, sir—" ventured Tom Merry.

"Yes?"

"We were—we were having a bit of an argument, and—"

"And you found it necessary to emphasise your remarks—is that it?"

"Yes, sir—well, not exactly," replied Tom Merry lamely. "Some bounders—I mean, some chaps raided our study, and—and—"

The corners of the House-master's mouth twitched slightly.

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"Very well, Merry, I accept your very lucid explanation. What was your argument about, Blake?"

"The same thing, sir," said Jack Blake.

"And you, Figgins?"

The leader of the New House flushed.

"Somebody put a sausage—I mean, a sardine in our jam!" exclaimed Fatty Wynn indignantly.

"A sardine—ahem!"

Mr. Railton blew his nose violently.

"I take it that you have quite settled your little argument?" he said, after a pause.

"Oh, yes, sir!" said Tom Merry cheerfully.

"Very well, then. You, Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn had better return to your own House. Don't let me hear any more noise now, or I shall be compelled to join in the—the argument! You others return to your studies!"

"Where's our furniture?" whispered Jack Blake, as he followed the House-master out of the study.

"Box-room, fathead!" said Tom Merry, with a grin.

Jack Blake glared, and looked as if he would like to start the argument over again, but he grinned instead, and followed Mr. Railton demurely down the corridor.

For the rest of the evening the quiet of the School House was undisturbed.

Blake & Co. spent over an hour in retrieving their goods and chattels from the box-room, but as Tom Merry & Co. spent almost as long in restoring their study to its accustomed state, matters were pretty nearly equal.

By the time they were settled comfortably, everybody was pretty tired, and any further reprisals were not to be thought of.

"All the same," observed Tom Merry, "it's been a glorious rag. Funny old Blake & Co. should have been on the same tack."

"I thought there was something up when we saw them come along to the bath-room," exclaimed Lowther, "but you wouldn't listen."

The leader of the Terrible Three poked the fire vigorously, and pretended not to hear.

CHAPTER 9.

The Career of "The Alarum."

"It strikes me—" said Manners.

"Where does it strike you? There?"

Monty Lowther brought the knob end of the poker down gently on the back of his chum's head.

"You're looking for a thick ear, Monty."

"Not at all. What is it that strikes you if it isn't this?"

"Let him alone!" cried Tom Merry. "We may be spoiling a great thought."

"Chuck rottin'!" said Manners; "this is serious. Haven't you noticed anything of late?"

It was not much that escaped the eyes and ears of the Terrible Three, and Tom Merry shook his head.

"The only thing I've observed," he said slowly, "is a slight hint of incipient madness in a certain chap named Man—"

"Oh, dry up!" exclaimed Manners irritably. "It's Gore!"

"What about Gore?" inquired Tom, with a show of interest.

"He's so quiet."

"M'yes, that's certainly to be wondered at."

"And Mellish and Skimpole."

"Skimpole's never very much to the fore."

"No, but you never see anything of him now. The three of them box themselves up in their study, and—well, I'm certain there's something up."

"Q.E.D.!" cried Tom Merry. "Good old Manners! You'd make a splendid tec. You've proved the case against Gore, Mellish, and poor old Skimpole without a single bit of evidence."

"All right," grumbled Manners, "you'll see!"

Two days had passed since the triangle raid, and if the chums of St. Jim's had not found very much to do, the same could not be said of the amateur Socialistic editor of the new paper.

The work of producing "The Alarum" had gone on in the strictest secrecy, and, strange to say, Saturday had arrived, and none beyond Skimpole, Gore, and Mellish knew of the cover-page that was being printed on that very morning, and the pile of duplicated typewritten sheets that lay in the editor's drawer.

Skimpole had worked early and late, and he was at that

moment engaged in writing out a poster. Another few hours, and the old college of St. Jim's would see the birth of his new paper.

Gore had carried all before him, and the amateur Socialist, engrossed in his editorial labours, never thought of where the money was to come from.

"You'll see!" repeated Manners.

"I don't see at all," retorted Tom Merry. "What's the good of arguing that way? All we can do is to wait until we find something out. I—"

Tap!

"Come in?"

Clifton Dane opened the study door.

"Have you heard?" he inquired.

"No. What?"

"About the new paper."

"New paper?" gasped Tom Merry.

"I told you so!" breathed Manners, with an air of triumph. "What did I say?"

"Shut up!" snapped Tom Merry. "What is it, Dane?"

"Why, a parcel came from the printers at Rylcombe while I was in the study, and—"

"Yes, go on!"

"Well, it was the covers of Skimpole's new paper."

"I told you so!" shouted Manners.

"Don't take any notice of him, Dane," said Tom Merry.

"Go on!"

"It's called 'The Alarum.' They've got all the inside pages typewritten."

"Who's they?"

"Gore and Mellish. I thought the last few days they've been jolly anxious to get me out of the way. There's no secret about it now. Gore reckons that they're going to cut out your 'Weekly.'"

"Oh, does he?" said Tom Merry grimly. "We'll have a look into this after class."

The news of the rival paper spread all over the school like wildfire, and a fever of impatience to see a copy of the new venture burned in the hearts of the Fourth.

Saturday was a half holiday, and when at last the bell went, a crowd of juniors besieged the office of "The Alarum."

"No copies before four o'clock," announced Gore. "We're not ready yet."

The crowd of disappointed juniors dwindled gradually away, and during dinner Skimpole was bombarded with requests for a copy of his paper, but without result.

"Four o'clock!" was all he replied.

"Looks like being a bit of a set back for Tom Merry's mouldy rag," exclaimed Gore, when they returned to their study. "How are you getting on?"

The editor of "The Alarum" was industriously folding the typewritten sheets in their printed covers, and he was so pleased with his work that he did not complain that Gore was strutting about with his hands in his pockets.

"I've nearly finished, Gore."

"Good! If it hadn't been for me you wouldn't have had that cover printed."

"No," said Skimpole gratefully. "It does look fine. That's the last one. What's the time?"

"Half-past two."

The editor regarded the pile of "Alarums" with a proud smile. Herbert Skimpole was printed on every one.

"I say, Gore," he exclaimed presently, "don't you think we might have something printed on the door?"

The cad of St. Jim's stared, and stifled a snigger.

"Jolly good idea. Why not?"

"Office—private?" suggested Mellish.

"Well, not that quite," said Skimpole modestly. "I was thinking the editor's name and the title of the paper."

"Capital!" agreed Gore.

"I'll get some paint. There's a pot of black down in the tool-shed," said Skimpole, skipping out of the study.

A few minutes later, the amateur Socialist came along the corridor laden with a pot of paint and a short pair of steps.

He was all eagerness to paint the notice on the door, and he placed his steps in position and dipped his brush into the paint.

Just as he was about to make a start, Tom Merry came along.

The rival editor felt no animosity towards the amateur Socialist. He had a pretty shrewd idea as to whom was the prime mover, and he greeted Skimpole with a nod.

"Hallo! What are you up to?"

Skimpole turned round, with his brush in the air. At that moment the study door opened.

"My eye!" gasped Tom Merry.

"What—"

The amateur Socialist dropped his brush in dismay, and stared startled eyes into the face of Mr. Lathom.

The short-sighted little master spluttered with anger and

ANSWERS

surprise. A thin stream of black paint trickled down his face.

"How—how dare you?"

"I—I—I'm extremely sorry, sir!" exclaimed Skimpole nervously. "I—I didn't know. I had no idea you were inside."

"Nonsense!" snapped Mr. Lathom, mopping his face with his handkerchief. "Of course you did not. I do not suppose for one moment that you were aware that I was. But what are you doing with that pot of paint?"

"I was about to paint my name and—"

"Absurd!" exclaimed the master. "Take that pot of paint away at once. You're not to do anything of the kind; the idea is preposterous. Take it away!"

The indignant little master stalked off, and Skimpole sorrowfully picked up his paint-pot and steps, and wended his way to the tool-house.

The occasion of Mr. Lathom's visit had not by any means been a pleasure to Gore, since the master had merely called in to bring to mind a batch of lines to be delivered that afternoon; but Skimpole's discomfiture served to somewhat compensate for the unwelcome intrusion, and he chuckled gleefully.

It was certainly funny; but then the cad of St. Jim's was always pleased at another's downfall, so it might have been the reverse of comical.

No sign of his joy was apparent when Skimpole returned. "Jolly rough luck," he said. "Never mind, though. Oh, by the way, I've wrapped up a special copy for Merry & Co. They don't deserve it, but I suppose—"

"That's very good of you," exclaimed Skimpole. "I'm sure they will appreciate it."

Gore turned his head away and winked at Mellish.

The editor was unaware that the special copy contained an extra page, and had he known that the extra page was a typed copy of the article entitled "The Terrible Triplets," it would not have been sent, and quite a lot of unpleasant things would never have occurred. As it was, Skimpole placed the copy aside, and punctually at four o'clock it was delivered by a Third-Former at Study No. 1.

At five minutes past four all the copies of "The Alarum" were distributed, and Gore made hurried preparations to go out. An unusual anxiety also seemed to possess Mellish.

Just as the cad of St. Jim's laid his hand on the handle, the door opened from without.

Gore stepped back in dismay. Mellish turned a sickly green.

"The editor of 'The Alarum'!" said Tom Merry blandly.

"Yes," replied Skimpole, in surprise.

"Good! Come in, you chaps!"

Manners and Monty Lowther came in promptly, and stood with their backs to the door.

"What's the meaning of this?" blustered Gore. "Get out of the way!"

"Presently, my little man," said Tom Merry. "Do you know anything about this, Skimpole?" he went on, going straight to the point, and holding out the page inserted by Gore.

The editor of "The Alarum" gazed at the typewritten sheet in bewilderment.

"Why, I—I rejected this!" he stammered. "I don't know how it could have been typed, even! I fail to—"

"You fail to understand! Quite so!" said Tom Merry grimly. "I think I can make a pretty good guess that the one who kidded you to start a rival paper, also knows something about this."

"Well, and what of it?" growled Gore.

"Collar him!" said Tom Merry briefly.

Manners and Lowther flung themselves on the cad, and he was trussed up with rope that they had brought with them.

"It's no good yapping!" said Tom Merry. "You're going to be placed in the same little basket with your precious article. In with him!"

Spitting with rage, the helpless Gore was plumped into the wastepaper-basket.

"You—you—" he howled.

"Shut up!" said Tom Merry curtly. "I'll make you eat your words if you don't! Now, Mellish! We shall want another basket! You keep an eye on Skimmy, Manners. Lowther can manage Mellish by himself. I'll get ours."

"You'll not!" gasped the amateur Socialist.

"Oh, yes, we are, Skimmy," said Tom Merry firmly when he returned with the basket. "As editor, you're responsible. This'll teach you to be more careful in choosing your contributors and associates in the future."

The amateur editor was let down comparatively lightly, but all the same, he was rammed into the basket, and the terrible three left the office of "The Alarum."

"Poor old Skimmy! It's a bit rough!" said Tom Merry, as they entered their study. "He'll soon get loose, that's one thing!"

"Teach him to be careful, the silly young ass," replied Manners. "He ought to know better!"

"Hallo! What's going on in the quad?" inquired Lowther, walking to the window.

Yells of laughter rent the air, and a mob of juniors, mostly Third-Formers, were executing a war dance round a board stuck in the ground.

"Let's go down and see," suggested Manners. "It's a jape of some kind."

"What's the wheeze, Blake?" inquired Tom Merry, as they passed the leader of Study 6 in the hall.

"Oh, some of the kids have got hold of Skimmy's rag!" replied Jack Blake. "They've buried it, and stuck some sort of a notice up over it. Go and have a look for yourselves."

Hard on the heels of the Terrible Three came the amateur Socialist. It had not taken him long to struggle free from his bonds, and he hurried after the chums, bent on making apology for the objectionable page.

Before he knew where he was, he was surrounded by a yelling mob of Third-Formers, and hustled in front of a board stuck in the ground. He stared at it amazedly, and as he turned quietly away, the juniors grinned sheepishly, and looked rather crestfallen.

The board was inscribed in scrawling letters:

"HERE
LIETH THE
'ALARUM,'
TO
LIE
NO MORE."

Curly Gibson kicked the notice over savagely.

"That's enough!" he cried. "It strikes me the joke's gone too far as it is!"

The others felt the same, and so ended the brief career of Skimpole's weekly.

But the editor was not free of his responsibility, and that same evening the post brought him three letters—a bill from the printer for one pound two-and-sixpence, another for half-a-guinea from the stationer for hire of typewriter, and still another for fourteen-and-sixpence for the duplicated copies.

"Two pounds seven-and-sixpence!"

The amateur Socialist was alone in the study, and he muttered the words aloud, and stared miserably into the fire.

"Two pounds seven-and-sixpence! Oh!"

He looked up with a startled exclamation as a hand rested lightly on his shoulder.

"It's all right, Skimmy," said a cheery voice. "Look here, we've decided to offer you two ten for the copyright of your paper. Care to accept it?"

"But—"

"No buts. Look here. Will you undertake to stop your weekly? We don't want any rivals in the market?"

The amateur Socialist nodded his head feebly. The trials and tribulations of an editorial life had proved too strenuous, and this amazing offer fairly took his breath away.

It was a pretty transparent subterfuge, but it passed muster, and it never occurred to Skimpole to ask any questions; so he never knew that the Terrible Three had been down to the village that afternoon and acquired some information from the printer.

Neither did he know that nearly all the Fourth-Formers had subscribed to the whip round that had brought in the little pile of silver that lay before him on his desk.

"So long!" said Tom Merry, as he passed out. "Don't be late in the morning! We're no longer rival editors!"

THE END.

NEXT WEDNESDAY.

"Tom Merry in Liverpool."

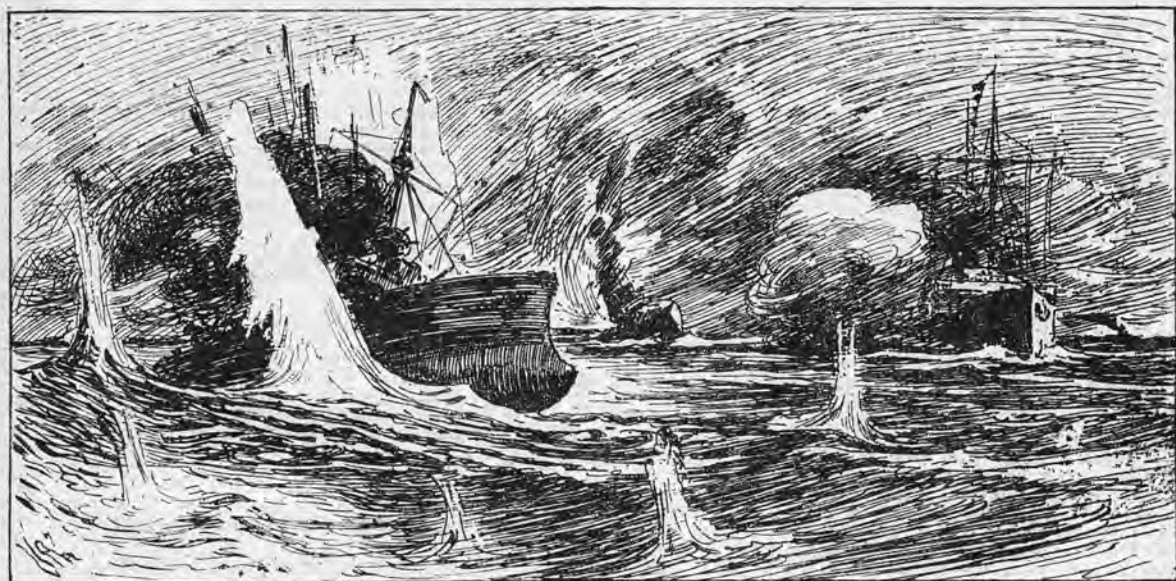
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Sam and Stephen Villiers, two cadets of Greyfriars School, by a combination of luck and pluck render valuable service to the British Army during the great German invasion. They are appointed special scouts to the Army, which is forced back on London by Von Krantz, the German commander.

At the time when this account opens, London had been bombarded and carried. Von Krantz had entered the City with his troops, the Lord Mayor was a prisoner at the Mansion House, and from the flagstaff on that famous building the German flag floated, where none but British colours had been seen since London was built. London Bridge was blown up, and across the great river the remainder of the British troops and the half-starved millions of London waited in grim silence for the next move.

Sam and Stephen are chafing at their enforced inactivity, when Ned of Northey, a young Essex marshman, and an old friend of theirs, sails up the Thames in his smack, the Maid of Essex, with a despatch he has captured from a German. This contains useful information of the landing of another German Army Corps, and Sam, having shown it to Lord Ripley, is given permission to go down river, and see what he can do. The boys and Ned sail down to the river mouth, and board a derelict steamer, which is loaded with petrol.

After setting adrift three dynamite hulks, the boys pour the petrol into the sea, and as the German Army Corps sail past the Nore, Sam sets light to the floating petrol. In a moment the Germans are in the midst of a river of fire, and boat after boat goes down. Two of the drifting dynamite hulks blow up and cause panic among the crew of a German torpedo-boat, which runs ashore.

Sam, Steve, and Ned sail away from the scene of destruction, and later on the two boy scouts go ashore in a dinghy. Returning to the smack in the dark, they are run down by a British torpedo-boat (No. 667). They are rescued, but at dawn are chased by two German torpedo-boat destroyers—one of which No. 667 manages to sink. They are hotly pursued by the remaining one, when, in rounding Foreness, they fortunately sight four British cruisers.

As the German vessel rounds the headland of Foreness, a jet of thin smoke spouts from the port casement of the nearest British cruiser.

Zoo-oo-oo-oo-bang!

(Now go on with the Story.)

Peppering the Enemy!

The six-inch shell roared overhead like some unseen angel of death. A high spout of water leaped up not two feet from the destroyer's side. Seeing her peril from the four great warships, she circled round in a panic and turned to fly.

Almost instantly a second shot followed, close on the heels of the first. The crash was heard plainly by those on 667, and the German destroyer was caught full amidships. She opened out like a paper boat stricken flat upon the sea, and a few seconds later the waves closed over her, and she was gone.

"My aunt!" said Cavendish cheerfully. "You two chaps have brought us luck, it seems to me. For a little tin-pot like this to be afloat after a chase by two 30-knot destroyers is quite out of the ordinary, let me tell you."

The two brothers did not reply at first. The complete wiping-out of the two vessels with all hands, and within ten minutes of the beginning of the chase, almost awed even Sam. They did not know much of sea fighting, either, but they could see the escape was due to uncommon luck and skill.

"I like this chap, by Jove!" said Sam aside to his brother. "He's got nerves like nickel steel, for all he looks such a kid!" The sub-lieutenant was not really any younger than Sam. "I shall be sorry to leave him an' this craft."

"Same here," said Stephen; and he added aloud to Cavendish, "I s'pose the beggars are at the bottom now?"

"Yes. Where they meant to send us," replied Cavendish. "Another half-minute 'd have done it. If anything happens to torpedo craft, you don't come out of it. You're either blown up, or boiled, or drowned. They don't carry any boats, of course, except foldin' ones."

"Which there's no time to open."

"No. So there's nothing to worry about, you see. If you're hit, it's a funeral. As for those two, they deserve all they got. They ought to have finished us off easily before we got round Foreness. Pretty shot of the Terrific's, wasn't it? That was Copper-nose, I'll bet! Best seaman-gunner in the Fleet. Small's his name in polite circles, but there's nothin' small about his firin'. There come the torpedo-boats out of Ramsgate!" he added, as four torpedo-boats very like his own glided out between the distant stone piers.

NEXT THURSDAY: "TOM MERRY IN LIVERPOOL." A School Tale of the Boys of "The Gem" Library, St. Jim's, by Martin Clifford. No. 59.

One of them, a few moments later, started at full speed towards No. 667.

"Flagship's signalled him to meet us," said Cavendish. "That's No. 435, Fatty Adair's boat. Good man, an' very keen. Bagged an armed German transport day before yesterday. Terrific's signallin' us to go up an' report, too. Well, I'm movin' as fast as I can. Bunkers are nearly empty, though."

The second torpedo-boat raced up, swung round, and steamed along abreast of No. 667. A plump, pink-faced boy, looking quite as cheerful as Cavendish, commanded her, and a huge, brawny torpedo-gunner stood beside him.

"Hallo, Bobby, my buck!" hailed the youthful commander. "You were well out of that shine. Saw you from the harbour. Want any help? They saw you were hit."

"No, Fatty; don't you worry your adipose tissue!" said Cavendish calmly. "All we require is a new Maxim, an' the lid of a cocoa-tin to patch our smoke-stack with. What news?"

"Pelagic had a turn-up with two old German cruisers yesterday that were tryin' to sneak through. Disabled one, an' drove the other ashore. Who've you got with you there?"

"Two devilish good chaps; introduce 'em to you later on! I've got to go and report," said Cavendish. "What sort of temper's Frankie in?"

"Pretty sour," said Adair, grinning. "He'll eat you without salt!"

"Not he! I'm going to cheer him up. What's worrying the old bird?"

"We've all been sweeping around for floating mines. The Germans have left the place simply sowed with 'em, and it's made the old man a bit grumpy."

"I'll soothe him," said Cavendish.

"He'll soothe you—with the butt-end of the poop-staff!" said Mr. "Fatty" Adair. "I'd rather desert than see him now! Wait till he begins to talk to you with the flags. Hallo, they're separating!"

The two biggest of the cruisers slowed down to a very easy pace, and, in answer to signals from the flagship, the two smaller ones wheeled and sped away to the north-east at full power.

"Going off on a job," commented Cavendish. "He's speaking me now!"

He watched the signalling keenly as he ran straight in towards the flagship, and slowed down abreast her as it ceased. A boat was already in the water from the great cruiser, and pulled off swiftly to No. 667.

"Got to go aboard and report to Frankie in person," said Cavendish. "I say, you chaps had better come, too."

"Isn't your squadron goin' up the North Sea after the Germans, though?" said Stephen, as the Terrific's boat came alongside.

"No. We're the watch-dogs for the Straits here, as I told you," returned Cavendish. "They'll find us sooner than we shall find them. Jump in quick!"

Away went the boat, and in less than a minute the three were aboard the flagship.

After the tiny torpedo-boat, it seemed like landing on an island—or, rather, a city—to be on board the huge steel monster, with her mighty guns and her hundreds of smart fighting-men.

The boys saluted as they stepped on deck, and after a curt word or two from her "Number One" (first lieutenant) to Cavendish they were passed aft.

"The old 'un's just gone to his cabin," said the youthful torpedo-officer in an undertone as they went. "You'll have to stay outside the door for a bit while I report."

They reached the stern cabin, with its sentry at the accor-curtains, and Mr. "Bobby" Cavendish was admitted at once.

Outside, the brothers, nudging each other, heard some of his report and the sharp, commanding tones of the vice-admiral. Cavendish was telling of the German squadron at Sheerness.

"Six others inside, sir," they heard him say, "but I couldn't get past the Point, of course—after high-water—buoys still there—four first-class battleships—passed in about three a.m.—took them to be the—"

Some half-heard German names of ships followed, and finally, in a few words, Cavendish reported the chase by the two destroyers.

"Got round just in time, sir. Not much damage to the ship; can repair funnels ourselves. By the way, sir—hope you won't object—I've got two lobsters here."

"Lobsters!" muttered Stephen outside. "Is it one of his duties to keep the old man in fish?"

"Shut up, you ass! He means us," whispered Sam.

Stephen did not know that afloat soldiers are still called "lobsters"—a relic of the days when red coats were worn even in action.

"What the devil for?" said the vice-admiral's voice sharply.

"I ran down their boat, sir, and picked them up. They've done some first-class service, sir. Just sunk the whole German Sixth Army Corps Flotilla with dynamite and petrol."

"Are you off your head, Mr. Cavendish?" said the voice.

"It's a fact, sir. I saw the blaze and wreckage myself. Wiped out the whole flotilla! I thought you'd like them to report to you, as I couldn't put them ashore. They're outside the door, sir."

"Bring them in quickly, and let me understand what on earth you are talking about!"

The door-curtains were flung open, and Sam and Stephen found themselves in the presence of Sir Francis Frobisher, a tall, keen-looking, clean-shaven elderly man, with a sharp, blue eye and a very strong face.

The brothers saluted smartly, and Stephen was thankful he had been able to change back into his own clothes since the chase, instead of appearing in the blanket-slops.

"Your names and Service?" said the admiral sharply.

"Lieutenant and Sergeant Villiers, sir, late Greyfriars' Cadet Corps," answered Sam.

The admiral opened his eyes.

"What! The two youngsters who met the first landing of the Germans at Frinton? Was it you who went into Maldon after the Kaiser?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ah!" said the admiral. "Tell me about this flotilla as quickly as you can."

As briefly as possible Sam related how Ned of Northey had brought him the letter, the interview with General Ripley, and the destruction of the German Army Corps Flotilla by the aid of the dynamite hulks and petrol.

Sir Francis listened intently, his surprise growing with every moment.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, as Sam concluded.

"Why the dickens aren't you in the Navy—both of you—eh, sir?"

"If we had been, sir, we shouldn't have been there to make use of the dynamite," said Sam, with a faint grin.

"Very true! The most amazing piece of work I ever heard of!" said the admiral, with strong admiration. "I've heard of you as a smart pair of youngsters, but this beats everything! Wish I had leisure to hear more of it, but my hands are full, and time presses. We shall encounter each other again. My thanks to you for this important report, and you will have the nation's thanks for what you have done. Mr. Cavendish!"

"Yes, sir?"

"You will go into Ramsgate at once, refill your bunkers there, and join the squadron. You can land these two gentlemen there, and they will be glad to get back to their service."

"Very good, sir!" Cavendish hesitated a moment. "I beg pardon, sir, but Lieutenant Villiers has a scheme I thought I ought to just mention to you. We could, he says, torpedo at least one of the German battleships at Sheerness."

"What!" said the admiral sharply, knitting his brows as he turned to Sam. "What the deuce do you know about it, sir?"

"I know a way into Sheerness, sir, by dark for a craft drawing not more than five feet," said Sam at once.

"Sheerness? Nonsense, boy! The mouth of the river will be strongly boomed against torpedo attacks. No vessel could possibly get in, unless the Germans are utter fools—which they aren't! Come—"

"The mouth of the river—yes, sir," said Sam; "but the Swale, which joins the sea at Whitstable, runs into the Medway at Queenboro', just above Sheerness, if you follow the course of it."

"The Swale!" Sir Francis halted and stared at him. "It is nothing but a ditch, boy! A narrow channel nearly dry at low water, winding among miles of great mud-flats and shallows—a wilderness, unbuoyed and unmarked."

"It is, sir; but I know the way through the wilderness. It's risky, of course, for a torpedo-boat, but I've gone through scores of times in sailing craft, and there's depth enough at high tide."

"But, my good lad, there's a railway bridge across!"

"Yes, sir—King's Ferry Bridge; it's made to open, though the Germans have probably stopped it. But the torpedo-boat would just go under easily, funnel and all, a little before high-water."

The admiral stood for a moment, thinking rapidly. Then he brought his fist down on the table.

"You shall try it!" he said. "Mr. Cavendish, you will get to the Swale as best you can about three-quarter flood to-night, and proceed through to Queenboro' under Lieutenant Villiers' pilotage. If by chance you get through, you will attack the German battleships as the chance best offers."

"Yes, sir," said the sub-lieutenant cheerfully.

And the boys' eyes glistened. The admiral turned to Sam.

"You are a volunteer, and I have no direct authority over you. I accept your suggestion as a free offer."

"Thank you, sir!" said Sam gratefully.

"No; it is my thanks that are due to you. In our Service, however, we make large sacrifices in order to win. The loss of one torpedo-boat will be no great matter to me," added Sir Francis, with a slight, grim smile. "You realise, of course, that the danger to your own life will be extreme?"

"I don't mind that, sir," said Sam. "Even ashore we take risks to win."

"Go, then!" replied the admiral. "Mr. Cavendish, proceed into Ramsgate at once, and fill your bunkers. As to reaching Whitstable, I leave you to your own devices. You have shown yourself to be possessed of nerve and judgment. Good-bye, gentlemen!"

The three youngsters saluted, and went on deck. Several friends of Cavendish belonging to the *Terrific* were keen to know what his mission was, but the sub-lieutenant did not stop.

"Curiosity's a vice, my unfortunate pals," he said to them. "We're under orders to pull the Kaiser's moustache by both ends! You remain on this blessed cathedral of yours an' burn the taxpayers' coal, but we're the real thing! Good-bye; we're busy!"

Cavendish saw the two brothers into the boat, and went down the side himself, leaving the younger officers of the gun-room mess secretly envying him deeply, though they professed to sniff at No. 667. There was no change to be got out of Mr. "Bobby" Cavendish, and a minute or two later he and the boys were back on the wet decks of the torpedo-boat.

"Round with her, Birch!" he said to his petty-officer. "Head in for Ramsgate by the Old Cudd Channel! Well, you two chaps, we fetched Frankie nicely—eh?"

"It's gorgeous!" said Sam. "I never dreamed we'd get the chance!"

"To tell you the truth, neither did I. But I believe your scheme's a sound one, Villiers, an' the old man thought so, too, evidently. Well, we shall know to-night whether it is or not."

"I'll see you through the Swale, if you can handle the torpedoes when we get there!" said Sam.

"If I can handle—" "Pon my life, the cheek of you land-crabs beats everything! An' yet I oughtn't to say that, for I'm blessed if I should be able to get through the Swale, never havin' been there!"

"An' we're really off to tackle those battleships, with a good chance of baggin' one!" exclaimed Stephen joyously. "Glory, but it's great! I've never seen a torpedo attack. Now I'm goin' to be jolly well in one!"

"There's Ramsgate ahead of us," said the lieutenant. "It ain't a place our sort of craft use, but they've arranged for us to get coal there now. We burn a lot, an' don't hold much, you know, so we have to fill up pretty often, an' it's awkward coalin' at sea. Ever been here?"

"Yes, but I can barely recognise it," said Sam, looking wonderingly at the town as they approached. "The terraces are all knocked to pieces, an' the Granville Hotel looks like a skeleton. Pugin's Tower's gone, too!"

"The Mary Anns did that," said Cavendish. "A German tramp steamer, with a lot of six-inch guns mounted came an' sent a message ashore to the mayor, to say that if the town didn't pay up a giddy indemnity of £10,000 in cash, she'd start bombardin'. Ramsgate told her to go an' be blowed, so she started knockin' spots off Ramsgate. There's no fort here to reply, you see."

"An' she got away scot-free?" cried Stephen.

"Not quite. She went on to Hastings an' played the same game there, an' while she was at it our little lot hove in sight, an' she scooted. The Wessex went after her, an' now she's reposin' gracefully on the bottom of the Channel somewhere over by the French side. Hallo!"

His hand suddenly grasped the lever of the engine-room telegraph, a bell clanged rapidly below, and with a strong churning of water with her screw, No. 667 stopped nearly dead, for she had been going slow. Cavendish's eye was fixed on something that rolled and bobbed close to the surface about fifty yards ahead.

"Turn the hose on that, Birch," said the sub-lieutenant cheerfully; and the man stepped to the gun.

"What is it?" queried Stephen, looking curiously at the thing. It had rather the appearance of a great football, half waterlogged, and driving along with the waves right in No. 667's track.

"Floating mine," replied Cavendish; and as he spoke the gun spat twice. There was a tremendous roar as the little shell struck the mine. The sea seemed to be torn open for a second, and the spray and salt water fell around like rain.

"Pretty little things to leave about, ain't they?" said

Cavendish coolly, ringing on half-speed again. "The Germans have sprinkled 'em round pretty liberally. Two of our destroyers have been blown up already."

"What a crash it made!" said Sam. "Not much chance for us if we'd struck it—eh?"

"No. This hooker an' her crew would have been iron filings an' sausage-meat by now. That one would have done for the *Terrific*, let alone a cock-boat like this. Bear up for the buoys, Birch!"

"By gum, I should think a fellow wants eyes all round his head for this game!" murmured Stephen. "You're right, Sam; we've struck a chap who knows his work."

Cavendish kept an eye like an hawk on the sea all around the torpedo-boat while conning her in through the Old Cudd Channel, though all the time he appeared to take it easily enough. Nothing further occurred to hinder her, however, and soon the wet, black little craft swooped in between the Ramsgate pier-heads and ran up the west gully, where she made fast alongside the quay.

"No time to run her into the dock," said Cavendish, as several excited inquirers came down the quay, of whom he took no notice. "They've got a movable coal-shoot, and they'll have to load her here. It'll be rather a job, but we're bound to catch the night tide."

"How long will you be?" said Sam.

"We'll start as soon as it's dark. I'm going to fill my bunkers now and patch up that smoke-stack. You chaps'll be out of the way ashore; there'll be nothing here to stay for but coal-dust. No, I can't come with you. So long! Of course, you won't breathe a hint about where we're bound?"

"Course not," said Sam.

And the brothers set out along the quay for the town, leaving Cavendish embroiled with Admiralty coalmen and supply agents, who began to jump around with greatly increased speed when the sub-lieutenant got to work on them.

"Rare chap, that!" said Stephen. "Well, we've got the dickens of a night in front of us, Sam, an' it's many a day since I had a real meal. I vote we stand ourselves the best dinner Ramsgate can show, an' if we go to the bottom at Sheerness, we sha'n't lose anything—we shall take it with us."

Sam was willing enough, and they found with some surprise that nearly as good fare could be had at Ramsgate as ever by paying for it.

They had an excellent dinner in a first-class hotel, half of which was in ruins, though the other half kept going, and the bill came to nearly four pounds for what would have cost ten shillings in ordinary time.

"My eye," said Stephen, "it's lucky we get our rations when we're at work; we'd soon be blessed hard up if we had to live ashore! Salt pork an' sardines on No. 667'll be good enough for us after this. Look, the sun's settin'!"

"It's goin' to be a pitch-dark night," said Sam, watching the clouds gathering to windward and spreading over the sky. "Let's get aboard. I hope I don't pile that torpedo-boat up on the flats in the Swale. It's a jolly sight more difficult job than I said it was, Steve, as you know."

"You'll bring it off," said Stephen confidently, "unless we get mopped up on the way."

They went down the quay ladder and boarded No. 667. She had filled her bunkers, her steel decks were washed and clean, and Mr. Hicks, the engine-room artificer who was chief engineer, had neatly riveted and patched the gaping wounds in the smoke-stack.

"You've run it close, you chaps," said Cavendish. "It's time we got. Cast off, there!"

Three minutes later the long, black, wicked-looking vessel glided silently out between the pier-heads, and the boys felt the wind of the open Channel on their faces.

No. 667 turned sharply north-eastwards and ran up past Broadstairs to the Foreland, rounding the Long-Nose Buoy, where she had so narrowly escaped in the morning.

Doubling sharp round the headland, she steered inwards along the coast towards Margate and the Thames mouth.

"No searchlights," said Cavendish, glancing round the horizon. "We haven't much to fear except from destroyers. All depends on our gettin' past Whitstable and into the Swale."

"Shall we find the German ships at home if we make Sheerness?" asked Stephen anxiously.

"Bound to find some of 'em, anyhow. Don't you worry about that. Those are Herne Bay lights—to port. I didn't expect to get as far as this without sighting one of their prowlers."

"Well, two of 'em were sunk this mornin'."

"Two! They've got a couple of score between here and the Humber—destroyers alone. One has to keep so far off the shore here," added Cavendish, peering ahead, "and there are shoals outside to seaward of us, too. According

to the charts now there are patches and sands all the way along inshore."

"You can go over all of 'em at this time of tide," said Sam, "an' keep as close in as you like within a quarter-mile as long as you bear out again to clear Whitstable Street. That's a long stony spit, an' stretches out a deuce of a way just at the entrance to the Swale."

Cavendish accordingly headed much closer in shore. The vessel showed not a spark of light, and was gliding along slowly.

"What's the depth here?" said Cavendish, as they left Herne Bay astern, the dark line of the low Kentish coast on their left close by. He knew they were far out of ordinary ship-tracks.

"Only six feet, as the tide is," said Sam; "bottom, muddy, sand, an' chalk stones."

Cavendish had the lead cast, with tallow in the hollow at the bottom of it. Just one fathom was the depth, and the tallow brought up some mud and grit and a pebble or two of chalk.

"You seem to know the blessed coast here like your own backyard," said Cavendish, all his doubts set at rest. "It's a pity they don't let us chaps fossick about in places like the Swale, and ferret out hidden channels among rocks and sand, instead of assing about at manoeuvres."

"So they ought, only it'd worry the giddy Admiralty when you got left high and dry on a bank," grinned Sam. "There's the Swale opening before you! Looks big enough to harbour a fleet, don't it? But there's only a narrow channel through the shallows. What's that to leeward?"

His sharp eyes had caught sight of a moving shadow far ahead and to the left, crossing the mouth of the Swale.

Cavendish saw it at the same moment.

"Destroyer!" he murmured.

A couple of words down the tube, and the torpedo-boat slowed down till she hardly moved.

No searchlight was shown on the distant vessel. She was cruising in towards Whitstable, and, as they looked, she turned and steamed back again the other way.

"She's patrollin' across the Swale mouth," said Stephen, "backwards an' forwards."

"That's it!" nodded Cavendish.

"My aunt! Will the Germans be keepin' a watch over the Swale, then?" muttered Sam. "Do they reckon on an attack that way, after all?"

"Can't say. If so, we're done at both ends. But that craft may be only watchin' for merchant ships trying to run the blockade an' reach Faversham Harbour, just inside the Swale there."

"They haven't seen us, anyhow."

"No, not yet. We've got the land behind us for a back-ground. She shows no searchlight. All the more likely she's waitin' to trap steamers. How close can I go here without striking?"

"Nearly up to the causeway there—Whitstable Street, where you hear the sea breaking. If you sneak out round the end of it an' in towards the shore again on the other side, you'll be able to dodge away over the shallows an' get into the Swale. He'll have to keep out in the Channel if he needs more water to float in than you."

"He does," Cavendish nodded.

And they waited breathlessly while the long dark shape glided in towards the land again. They could make out her outline, for she was between them and the open sea. But the gloom of the land was in favour of No. 667.

The German did not see her, for he turned and steamed out again.

Cavendish seized his opportunity. Gliding along by the long causeway of stones which lay across his path, he slipped round the seaward end of it, dodged in towards the shore again, and darted away rapidly for the mouth of the Swale while the destroyer was steaming in the other direction.

In another minute nothing was to be seen of the German—he was left behind.

"Dodged him!" said Cavendish blandly. "It was precious tempting to stay and have a turn up; we could have sunk him before he found out we were there, for we were on his blind side. But business before pleasure. We're not to do any scrapping till we've attended to our errand."

"Right!" said Sam. "We're well out of that. Bear hard round to starboard; there isn't water for you over the Pollard Sand yet."

"You'd better take charge of the pilotage now," replied the sub-lieutenant. "Birch, Mr. Villiers will give you your course. Steer exactly as he tells you."

Glancing at the dark shores on either side, Sam gave his orders in a low voice, and the torpedo-boat glided along past Faversham Creek and the Horse Sand. Once past these, the wilderness of shallow water and hidden sandbanks began, but No. 667 went steadily ahead at the same pace.

To a landsman the wide creek looked like one big expanse of open water, but the vessel turned and twisted like a

swallow under Sam's guidance, keeping to the unmarked channel that threaded through the shoals. He steered by marks on the dark banks—trees and mounds and huts—that he knew by heart. One mistake, and the vessel would have rammed herself hard and fast aground.

"My aunt, but you do know your job!" said Cavendish admiringly. "It's like playin' blind man's buff on a night like this among all these mud-flats! One thing, no German could find his way after us."

"Not unless he'd been a bargee up here," said Sam. "Don't go too fast, or we'll be ahead of our tide. It's nearly dry here when the water's ebbed."

For three parts of an hour little was said on board No. 667, as she slowly crept along on the flowing tide. Once only did she touch for a few moments on the end of a sunken spit; but the engines were given full play, and she drew off. At last Sam straightened himself and gave a sigh of relief.

"We're over the worst of it," he said. "The creek's narrower here, but deeper, for we're gettin' towards the Medway end. This is only an arm of the sea that runs behind Sheppey Island, as you know. We'll raise King's Ferry Bridge in a minute, an' then there's a good deep channel the rest of the way. It wants an hour to high water."

"Then we're near the time for strikin'," said Cavendish. "We shall open up Sheerness an' the battleships soon," said Stephen eagerly.

"I know my way once I am at Queenborough. But for you we'd never have got there," said Cavendish. "It'll be a quick rush—full speed! We ought to get one at least, unless any patrol-boat gives the alarm."

"Which'll you go for?"

"The nearest an' biggest. By good luck we might even get two before they sink us. By the way, Frankie was pretty near the mark in what he said. If we do our job, there ain't much chance of our coming out of it alive," added the lieutenant amiably. "Their guns are sure to get us. Do you fellows object?"

"We're comin' through with you, sink or swim!" said Stephen.

"I knew you would. With some chaps I'd offer to slow up an' let 'em swim ashore before we make the rush, but I've seen enough of you to know I should only be insultin' you if I suggested that. That's the railway bridge, isn't it? We'll make a dash through, in case any sentries are there an' give the alarm."

The big pillars and girders of King's Ferry Bridge, over which the South-Eastern Railway runs, loomed ahead, and No. 667 made a swooping dash and shot under it. The room underneath looked scanty, but Cavendish had complete faith in Sam by this time, and they passed under with space to spare overhead.

Sam took charge again, and once past the next shoal, the torpedo-boat increased her speed till she was flying along the channel. Queenborough soon came into view on the right bank, with its short pier nearly blocking up the narrow creek.

"Man at the fore and deck tubes!" said Cavendish to his men. "Number One in rear of the tube—secure tube to diaphragm—clear away securing-bar!"

The boys looked on with a sudden thrill as they saw the long, deadly, cigar-shaped messengers of death brought into place and the tubes manned. Neither of them had ever seen a Whitehead torpedo at close quarters before.

"Will they have torpedo-nets out—or whatever they're called?" said Stephen suddenly.

"They may. It's no odds, for my little Havannah cigars here have got the newest wire-cutting heads," said Cavendish. "They'll shear through any net in creation. Are you ready there?"

"Ay, sir!" answered the men.

"Three-quarter speed, please, Mr. Hicks."

No. 667 slid forward swiftly and ran along the channel, throwing up a stern-wave that broke and roared along the muddy shores of the creek. Queenborough seemed to leap upon the boat as if it were moving towards her, and in a few moments the black timbers of the pier were passed, the pile-light on the spit to the left was seen, and the Swale opened into the broad Medway estuary, near its junction with the sea.

Sam and Stephen felt a sharp thrill of excitement as the scene burst upon them as if a curtain had suddenly been drawn up. Right ahead, off the dark Sheerness shore, lay four great grey monsters—the German battleships at anchor. They had made the Medway's mouth as secure for them as if they lay at home in the Elbe—so they thought. Round about them lay smaller craft.

Each one was sweeping the mouth of the river ahead with a powerful searchlight. Four great cones of light sprouting from each ship's foretop, moved slowly back and forth over the open gate of the Medway and the sea beyond, where four or five torpedo craft—watch-dogs of the night—

were patrolling up and down on guard. They had learned their lesson from the destruction of the Army Corps flotilla. No enemy could now approach that way.

But they knew nothing of the stealthy little foe, with its crew carrying their lives in their hands, that came sweeping out of the muddy creek behind them.

All this the boys took in within a few seconds. Once clear of the Swale, it lay before their eyes. They were conscious of a hoarse shout from the pier at Queenborough as they sped past, but in a twinkling the place was left behind and they were out in the open.

"Full speed ahead!" said Cavendish down the tube.

No. 667 leaped forward like a slipped greyhound. Away behind, up the river, two destroyers that sighted her wheeled round as swiftly as they could, not knowing who the stranger might be, but hardly deeming she could be an enemy.

It was all done in the time it takes to count thirty. No. 667 tore ahead with a great shoulder of water leaping back from each bow. Straight towards the first of the great grey battleships she sped, while the searchlight was still uselessly sweeping the river's mouth in front. Had the Germans seen her, a dozen guns would have blown the little English craft out of the water. But she was already in torpedo-range when she left the Swale, and not fifty yards had she sped when the order came quietly from Cavendish's lips:

"Shut down! Let go!"

Pop! said the deadly torpedo, as it shot out and plunged under water like a seal.

The instant it had gone, No. 667 swerved strongly and dashed on for the next vessel.

Then followed a dull, muffled shock that seemed to shake the whole river, and Sam felt the deck-plates quiver under foot. A great column of water leaped into the air against the German battleship's side, and she heeled violently over. Wild shouts were heard as the explosion died away; the searchlight seemed to stagger across the sky, and the stricken vessel reeled like a drunken man.

At the same moment No. 667's deck tube sent a second messenger of death speeding at the next battleship, the torpedo-boat swerved right round in a circle and hurled herself back towards the Swale. Again the river trembled as a mass of water shot upwards under the second ship's stern, and she seemed to lift bodily at her moorings.

"Got 'em!" cried Stephen, mad with excitement. "Got 'em both!"

The guns of the first ship opened fire with a crash, and the air seemed filled with flying shells. In blind panic, not knowing what had hit them or who their enemy was, the German gunner fired blindly. Those on the torpedo-boat expected to be wiped out of existence, for the first of the two destroyers that had wheeled towards her also opened fire, and two shells came crashing aboard, when, to the boys' amazement, they saw the destroyer reel and sink instantly under a hail of heavy missiles.

She had steamed straight towards the sinking battleship, firing as she went, and the latter had mistaken her for the attacking vessel, and sunk her in the twinkling of an eye. The frail steel shell went down like a stone, her boilers exploding as she disappeared, and No. 667, low in the water, and not a third the bulk of the destroyer escaped, scot free for the moment, and dashed for safety.

Stephen clung to the rail as she swerved, bewildered by the deafening noise of the guns and the insane confusion. As the torpedo-boat sped back for Gainsborough, he saw the first battleship had slipped her moorings, and was desperately trying to beach herself on the Sheerness mud before she sank, while the other one was settling down fast by the stern, the remaining two hurriedly raking the river with their searchlight, and the torpedo vessels were flying in from the sea as fast as they could tear.

It was only a glimpse, and then the shores of the creek shut it out. No. 667 had dodged back before the searchlights caught her, but not before the second of the two destroyers was on her track. The German followed at full speed, firing rapidly with a twelve and a six-pounder, and in a few seconds the British craft's deck was ripped open along one side, and her deck torpedo-tube knocked into scrap-iron. She was barely saved from destruction for the time by flying past Queenborough Pier, which hid her from the enemy.

"Mr. Hicks, give her the last ounce if you burst her," said Cavendish coolly, with his mouth to the tube. "Birch, stand by to open on the lady astern with the three-pounder as soon as she shows round the point. Where's Simpson?"

"Gone, sir. Shell got him."

"Sorry; he was a good man. I'll take the wheel, Birch. Yes, the German's got us cooked. We're takin' in water fast, and he's overhaulin' us."

Suddenly the destroyer appeared in the creek, but again No. 667 was round the next bend before the German could

fire. It seemed to Stephen like a grim game of follow-my-leader, or the hunting of a crippled hare. Sam stood amazed to see how Cavendish took the curves and bends of the creek at such a speed without running ashore, and almost forgot the danger in his admiration, though the night was lighter now.

"All very well here," said Cavendish. "It's in the straight reach up to the bridge that he'll have the better of us. If he can once get his searchlight on us that twelve-pounder'll finish the job in thirty seconds. I'd have liked to get back to Frankie with the news; but it can't be helped. Birch, ready with that gun!"

The long straight reach leading to the iron railway-bridge opened before them, and Cavendish took his vessel up it with a rush. Before she had covered half the distance the German destroyer swung round the bend into full view.

Her searchlight wavered a moment, and then lit full upon No. 667 and stayed there. The roar of her twelve-pounder woke the echoes of the creek, once, twice, thrice.

The first shot struck the water close alongside, and the second tore the torpedo-boat's funnel clean away. There was a fiendish crash as the third burst upon the stern and laid the vessel's vitals open down to her keel. The seaman-gunner, his head smashed by a fragment of shell, fell dead across the broken rail, and No. 667, lurching violently, checked, and halted in her course.

The End of No. 667.

Dazed and half-stunned by the explosion, Sam staggered to the side, wholly surprised to find himself alive, and wondering if he could swim in his riding-kit when the vessel went down.

He saw the body of the seaman-gunner topple and plunge overboard as she lurched; and, as if in a dream, he was aware of the petty-officer's eye glinting along the barrel of the three-pounder, which instantly spoke with a rattle and a bang. It was all done in a moment, and the gun had hardly opened fire when a splitting crack was heard far behind, and the infernal glare that lit up No. 667 ceased as if by magic, plunging her in darkness.

"Well done, Birch! Got him in the searchlight!" said Cavendish, as cheerfully as if he were applauding a boundary hit at cricket. "Mr. Hicks, does she continue to go?"

"Can do, sir," came the answer up the tube, "but not for long. Water's comin' in."

"Great Scott!" coughed Stephen, hanging on to the rail. "I thought we were at the bottom!"

"We're like a duck with its tail shot away," said Cavendish; "but there's life in her yet. All depends on the bridge."

Though she had almost stopped when the shell tore her open, the torpedo-boat reeled and shot ahead again. Badly smashed though she was, neither engines nor steering-gear were touched, and she flew onwards for her life.

Birch's shot had struck the German's searchlight, and shattered it into scrap-iron, and for half a minute or more the destroyer seemed thrown into confusion. She had depended on the light not only to hunt her prey, but to show her the way up the narrow creek, and when plunged into darkness it was all her crew could do to keep her off the shallow water that flanked the banks. She dared not go at her top speed, or anything like it, in such a place, but she was still overhauling the crippled torpedo-boat.

Crack, crack, crack! went the guns again, but she made poor shooting in the dark, and those on the torpedo-boat heard the shells whistle wide. Cavendish still had the wheel. The shores of the straight reach flew past, and the great piles and girders of the railway-bridge leaped into view.

"The tide's right up!" muttered Stephen. "Will she go under?"

There was no time to speculate on chance. Cavendish drove her straight for the bridge, and the boys heard the echoes roar back from the great stone pillars, as she sped beneath the iron girder. The tide had risen to an unusual height, but there was plenty of room; and, moreover, No. 667 had now no smoke-stack, and the smoke poured aft straight along the deck in a choking stream.

Another shell came aboard just as she cleared the bridge, and, bursting below, sent some of its splinters flying through the bulkhead into the engine-room.

"She's clear through!" cried Stephen, as the bridge was left behind. "How is it that swab astern of us hasn't run on to the mud? He's followin' on still."

"By gum," exclaimed Sam. "If the German tries the bridge he'll never get under! There ain't height enough for him. Here he comes. Great guns, he's at it!"

The thing happened even as he spoke the words. The German destroyer knew nothing as to the railway-bridge or its height, and in her fierce rush after the escaping prey she

found it right before her in the darkness. Even had she known, it would have been impossible to stop in time, and she charged straight through to follow her quarry.

There was a loud ripping crash, followed by a confused shouting and the sharp hiss of steam. Looking back, the boys saw the German catch her funnels fairly against the iron edge of the bridge. The first smoke-stack was rent right off, the second and third jammed together, and the destroyer, flung violently off her course, crashed into the stone pillar on her left, amid the shouts of her crew.

There she stuck fast, a shattered wreck, her fourth funnel jammed against the bridge, and the glare from her engine-room lighting up the scene through the rent-off deck. Crippled and smashed she lay, settling and filling fast.

A ringing cheer went up from No. 667, and the torpedo-boat, saved from the very jaws of death, rattled on into the night with her own engines almost at their last gasp.

"Hurrah!" shouted Stephen, as the bend of the Swale shut out the view of the stricken foe. "Three of 'em settled in an hour. Gosh! Wasn't that great?"

"Half an hour earlier, an' I believe even she would have got under safely," said Sam. "The water's higher than I've ever seen it up here—nor west wind has piled the tide up. Well, there's an end of her, anyway."

"It's our night out," said Cavendish appreciatively. "Will you take charge again here, Villiers? We're gettin' among the shallows an' flats."

Sam stood by the wheel and directed the steering, while the crippled vessel worked her way painfully along. Hicks, from the engine-room, sent up an urgent message to his commander through the tube. A fragment of the last shell had killed his leading-stoker, and Birch had to be sent down to help at the fires. Cavendish steered according to Sam's directions, save which no one spoke for some time. At last the torpedo-boat drew clear from the worst of the shoals, and half the return journey down the Swale was done.

"Phew!" said Sam, with a sigh of relief. "We've done our work, anyhow, but I never expected to see this channel again."

"Should rather think not," said Cavendish. "I can tell you, it was just the toss of a coin, our gettin' out like that before the searchlights spotted us. Those big guns would have opened us out like a matchbox inside five seconds. We've lost two hands—a gunner and an A.B.—good men both of 'em, an' rare sorry I am they're gone. But we've wiped out over two million pounds' worth of German ironclad, with probably forty men laid out in the crew of each. Frankie would give twenty little tin-pots like this for such a result, so he ought to be pleased, if we see him again."

"It was terrific!" said Sam. "I've seen some big work done ashore, but it just dazed me. First-class battleships, weren't they?"

"Rather! There wasn't time to see much of 'em, but I took one to be the Fuerst Johann, and the second the Hohenfels. If they had come into action against our ships, you could have reckoned on 'em killing a few hundred British sailors an' doing a few score thousand pounds' worth of damage, even if they were finally licked, an' they might have turned the scale of a battle. So you can call it cheap at the price."

"Gosh! Has such a thing ever been done before?"

"You bet! The Japanese nipped in on the first night of their war an' scuppered two big Russian ships. However, the Japs had destroyers, an' there were three of 'em—besides havin' no creek to get through in the dark. I think this little lot can claim to have gone one better. Then there's the destroyer that smashed herself on the bridge—that was luck, of course—an' the other that the battleship sank."

"I saw it. Spread-eagled her with their own guns!" exclaimed Stephen. "What on earth were they about?"

"She was makin' straight for the torpedoed ship, and she got it. No sayin' what men'll do in a panic. 'Member the Russians shellin' our fishin' boats on the Dogger Bank? You just get hoisted out of the water one night when you don't dream there's an enemy for miles, an' see what you'll do. There's the dawn risin' in the east, right ahead."

"So soon!" exclaimed Sam.

"A good night's work, though, eh? Yes, Mr. Hicks, what is it?" added Cavendish, bending over the engine-room tube.

"I only wished to report, sir, that the water's over the foot-plates down here," came the reply.

"You've done admirably in keeping her going so long, Mr. Hicks," said Cavendish blandly. "How much farther will she go?"

"The water'll reach the boilers in about a minute, sir, I think. Then they'll blow up."

"Thank you, Mr. Hicks!"

"What, is she so badly damaged?" said Sam anxiously.

"Damaged! My dear chap, she's done! It's been very interestin' seein' how long she'd keep afloat. They didn't

reach her engines or her waterline, but there ain't much else left of her." Cavendish spun the wheel round, and No. 667 turned abruptly to the right.

"Is she sinkin' then?" said Stephen apprehensively, for he had heard the engineer's message. "By gum, I can feel her goin' down under me!"

"Rummy sensation, isn't it?" said Cavendish calmly. And a moment later there was a surge and a heave as the crippled torpedo-boat's bows lifted in the air, and she stopped dead. "We sha'n't go any farther down, however, for I've run her on a mud-bank, an' there she'll stay. What's the bottom like here, Villiers?"

"Soft ooze. There's miles of it, an' she'll be high and dry when the tide's out," said Sam.

"Right! Now, I've got twenty minutes' work in front of me. You'd better look at the view."

He went below, and while the boys remained above on the rent and battered decks, the chill grey light of morning grew over the desolate waste of flats and water, and a thin, white haze crept in from the sea. In the interior of the vessel were ceaseless sounds of hammering, and soon Cavendish and Hicks came up from below, grimed and weary.

"We've finally scuttled her; not that she'd have been much good," said the sub-lieutenant. "Now we'll heave the spare Whiteheads over. If the mud's as soft as you say, they ought to sink in it."

The torpedoes were brought up, and each one, after being deprived of its head and detonator, was dropped over the side. The lock-action of the three-pounder was detached and flung away, and Cavendish looked round his craft with a sigh. It was the first time the boys had seen him look anything but cheerful, but in a few moments he brightened up again.

"The beggars are welcome to what's left of her," he said. "I haven't left 'em any pickings, nor as much as a cartridge to make use of when they follow her up. My Aunt Jemima, but I'd like to be at Sheerness now the day's dawned, an' hear the giddy German Admiral's opinions on the night's work!"

"You must feel horrid sick at losin' your vessel," said Stephen sympathetically, for he had heard of the grief of sea captains when their ships were lost. "You—you aren't goin' to stay an' go down with her, are you?"

"No jolly fear," said Cavendish blandly. "It ain't often a fellow survives the loss of a torpedo-boat in action, an' I'm quite willin' to be the freak. I'm not goin' down with her, for she's not going down at all, and if ever I reach the squadron with a whole skin I want Frankie to give me another. However, it ain't much good speculating on that, for the chances of gettin' out are pretty thin."

"If they find which way we've gone—which they're pretty sure to do, of course," said Sam, "they'll be after us before long."

"I should like to bet they're on their way now."

"The water's ebbin' fast; we'll be high an' dry soon, and the ooze is too soft to walk on," added Sam. "We'd be bogged to the armpits."

"True, Mr. Pilot. An' shipping's in the hands of the Germans, even if we could get ashore that tide. So we'll launch the Berthon boat, an' get out while there's water to float it, though where we're to go is more than—"

"Hallo!" said Stephen, who had been peering steadily down the channel. "Sail-oh! Comin' this way."

All turned to look at a red topsail that came curtseying through the mist, away over the deeper water, and a shadowy hull was seen beneath it.

"Not a German, anyway," said Cavendish. "Fishing-boat. If we can get him to take us off—"

"By gum!" exclaimed Sam, as the vessel resolved itself into a smart fishing-smack, with a gun-punt lashed along the deck, and a solitary figure in shining oilskins at the tiller. "It's Ned! It's the Maid of Essex! Ned, ahoy!"

The figure in oilskins started up as Sam's voice reached him, and looked intently at the stranded torpedo-boat.

How Ned Sold Fish to the Germans.

"It is him, by the Great Hook block!" cried Stephen. "Hooray!"

"Who?" said Cavendish, mystified.

"Ned of Northey, the marshman, our pal. That's the smack we lost when you ran us down."

"Holy pokers, is that you, Master Aubrey?" came Ned's voice across the water. "Is your brother there, too? Half a jiff, an' I'll launch the punt—"

"Get that dingy in the water," said Cavendish, to his men. "We ran down his, so we'll fix him up with ours. I don't know who your pal is, Villiers, but he's a friend in need if ever there was one. Get in!"

The Berthon boat was rapidly opened out and launched. She would only hold four at a pinch, so the boys, Cavendish, and Hicks pulled off to the smack, which had hove to, and could get no nearer on account of the shallow water.

"Glory, is it you, gents?" cried Ned, gripping the boys' hands convulsively in his horny paw as they came alongside. "I'd given you up for dead."

"You ought to jolly well know that we never give ourselves up for dead," said Sam; "but it's great to see your brown phiz again, Ned, an' you couldn't have turned up at a likelier time, either. Our ship yonder is busted, an' we're expectin' the Germans to breakfast."

"Come aboard, quick, then, sir, an' fetch the other chaps off," said Ned. "I'll find 'ee a way out."

Cavendish shook Ned cheerfully by the hand after saluting in Navy style as he boarded the vessel, and quickly went back again in the dinghy, after a few words of consultation. He was gone so long that there was barely water enough to float the boat back; but he brought back with him a couple of parcels which he handled very carefully. The only luggage Stephen had saved from the wreck was his beloved carbine.

"No time to bring any personal effects," said Cavendish. "I've got one or two things here which might be of service to us. We had to leave poor Gray the stoker behind, for we've no chaplain, an' there's no sayin' when or how we shall get anywhere. I've hoisted the Jack upside down on a staff, an' the enemy'll give him Christian burial, which is more than we can do. We've had the service read over many of their men."

He uncovered as he looked back at the desolate wreck of No. 667.

"He died at his post—may we do the same when our time comes," said the sub-lieutenant soberly. "Well, goodbye, little ship. I've only had you five days, but you've whipped a hundred times your weight in the Kaiser's fleet, so peace be to your bones. Now, sir, where are we bound?" he added, turning to Ned. "You're skipper here; I'm only a passenger."

"Out with the tide, first of all," said Ned, putting his helm up and easing the sheets, while the smack began to rustle through the water as the morning's breeze heeled her down. "Where in Shoebury ha' you gents been, an' what's that hooker on the mud?"

Stephen told him briefly how they had fared since the night before, and Ned's eyes opened wide as saucers.

"Great guns, sir! What a cruise!" he exclaimed. "Why, it's just what you were speakin' of as we sailed down outside Sheppey—an' you got the torpedo-boat to do it?"

"The skipper here did it. I was only pilot," said Sam. "But where have you been, Ned?"

"I cruised about till daybreak yesterday, sir, waitin' for you off Herne Bay, an' a rare state I were in. I thought you'd gone back to Lunnor or been drowned, for I never saw the dinghy."

"Did you pass a German destroyer outside last night?" exclaimed Stephen. "Didn't she stop you?"

"Nay, I've seen no such craft. I lay hid in a little crik in the Swale here, that just held the Maid of Essex, up by Crog Dick. Came out on the top o' the tide this mornin' to get a duck or two an' trawl for whittin'. I never saw you in the mist till you hailed."

"Then you found a safe hiding-place from the Germans," said Stephen. "I say, Sam, don't you think that's the best thing we can do, till the coast's clear? We're bound to be stopped at the entrance there, now it's daylight. An' this ain't a fightin' craft."

"Ned's for makin' a run for the open," said Sam.

"And I agree with Ned," put in Cavendish; "they'll search every hole an' corner all through the Swale, after last night's business, an' our only chance is to get out, if we can, before they bring the hue-and-cry down this way. Besides, while we're dodgin' about these mud-banks I'm not any nearer gettin' back to Frankie."

"Right! Can you run the Maid of Essex through to the admiral's squadron in the Straits, Ned," said Stephen, with a wink, "now our warship's done for?"

"I dunno much about steam-kettles," said Ned, with a sniff, "but I can take this craft wherever there's salt water, an' in any sorter weather."

"Don't jeer at steam-kettles. The Maid of Essex is hot stuff, but she couldn't have blown the keels out of two of the Kaiser's battleships," said Sam, grinning. "If those sails of yours don't draw us along fast enough, we shall all get our necks stretched."

"Necks stretched!" echoed Cavendish. "Give 'em a chance, old chap; they don't hang prisoners of war!"

"You may be all right, even though you've blown the daylight through 'em," said Sam; "but, you see, they've got a long account against Steve an' me for various troubles we've put 'em to, an' they allow we aren't really soldier-men or sailormen, but civilians."

"Which is obviously not," added Stephen; "but it's true

we don't draw any pay or belong to any regiment or fleet, an' if some of 'em caught us, I'm afraid the late Greyfriars Cadet Corps wouldn't save us from a firin' party, even if we were wearin' its full uniform. They shoot civilians caught fightin' against 'em, you know, though Sam's got the D.S.O., an' I'm a full sergeant, with sort of complimentary lieutenant rank, only I haven't any corps to be lieutenant of."

"In fact," said Sam, "there are one or two rather high personages on the Kaiser's staff who've promised to hang us as an example if they catch us; an' after the accident to their flotilla, I shouldn't feel extra safe with any of 'em. Still, I only mention that in passing; it doesn't really matter."

"You chaps have got pluck," said Cavendish. "The yardarm's a thing I shouldn't at all fancy, an' I know they've got nasty ways, these Dutchies. Still, as you say, bullet or rope, it's only a matter of sentiment, after all. The best solution of that puzzle is to keep out of the enemy's hands, which I always consider a duty. Rather! I say, Mr Ned of Northey—if that may be your name—do you think you're goin' to dodge that German destroyer that's fossickin' up an' down outside?"

"It's a hazy mornin', an' she mayn't see us," said Ned. "I reckon I can slip through Ham Gat, which is a channel in the sands leadin' close round Shellness Point, an' out to sea that way without goin' right round the Columbine Sands, where she's waitin'. Eh, Master Aubrey?"

Sam nodded. He thought there was a chance of slipping out by the short cut without being noticed. With fresh hope they ran the Maid of Essex eastward along the channel, and she slipped away past with the ebb-tide.

Now that the tide had run off the flats, showing the narrow deep-water channel winding like a snake among vast tracts of ooze and sand, it was easy to see what a feat Sam had achieved in piloting No. 667 through in the dark when all the sandbanks were covered by shallow water. Cavendish was more than ever impressed as he looked back up the Swale. But it was with the future that they had to deal now.

The mouth of the Swale, a couple of miles wide between Shellness and Whitstable, came into view ahead of them, with the open sea beyond, as they rounded the curve at Hart's Ferry. A sharp exclamation came from Ned's lips.

"It's no go, sirs. There's the dratted German lyin' right inside, off Shellness, instead of out by the bar, where you said she was. We've got to go right past her."

"Confound her, so she is!" muttered Sam, looking at the long, black vessel, with the smoke feathering gently from her four funnels, as she lay breasting the tide in the very entrance. "She'll stop us to a dead certainty; an' we can't go back."

"Looks as if we were crooked," said Cavendish cheerfully, brushing the coal-grit off his trousers.

"Get down below, gents!" exclaimed Ned. "Look sharp, before she gets her glasses on you! I'm only a marshman with a fishy old smack, an' maybe I can bluff her through."

"Dash me if I like skulking in the hold," said the sub-lieutenant; "but I s'pose it's the only thing to do, an' there's the neck-stretchin' to be thought of. Mr. Hicks, take the men through."

They all retired at once into the cabin, rather unwillingly. The petty officer, engineer, and torpedo coxswain went right through the little cabin door into the fore-castle beyond, the hatch of which was clamped down. The other three remained in the cabin itself, and Ned closed the folding-doors that led from it out into the steering well.

"We sha'n't do ourselves any good by bein' nabbed," said Sam. "It would put an end to our giddy sphere of usefulness. So we'll have to lump it, an' sit in here like mice, an' hope Ned gets through."

"It's all up if they board her," said Stephen. "I shall wish I'd stayed on deck if we're caught skulking below like this."

"There's a fair chance they mayn't trouble to search her, for she's only a fishin'-boat, like scores around here, an' don't look dangerous to the German Empire," said Sam.

"Do they know she had anything to do with the wreckin' of the Army Corps flotilla?" put in Cavendish, placing his legs up on the bunk and lying back comfortably.

"I should fancy not. Anyhow, we'd best hope they don't," said Sam grimly. "On the whole, the less we talk the better, perhaps, for we must be gettin' pretty near her."

"Shut up, gents, for goodness' sake!" said Ned's anxious voice outside, thus giving force to Sam's opinion. "They're lookin' at us through their glasses, an' she's runnin' down to us."

Ned, sitting solidly at the tiller, steered straight on as the German destroyer bore towards him. The distance rapidly decreased, and a hail came across the water in tolerable English

"Smack ahoy! You heave yourself up to!" cried the destroyer's commander sharply.

"Go and chase yourself!" muttered Ned, under his breath. A shot from one of the German's three-pounders sped across the smack's bows, and dashed up a spray of water. Ned stolidly put his helm down, and those below heard the rattle of the fore-sheet as he hauled it to windward and hove the smack to. She lay there, waiting. Ned kicked one of the cabin doors open, thinking it looked suspicious to keep them closed.

The destroyer, with her guns uncovered and the white salt crusting on her plates, came alongside within twenty feet.

A short, squat, German lieutenant goggled fiercely at the Maid of Essex and her solitary-looking skipper.

"What was der name of dot smack?" he said sharply. "Where from and where bound?"

"Maid of Essex," said Ned staring at him with a stupid air. "Faversham to Leigh."

"On what business?" "Fishing."

The squat commander of the destroyer looked the Maid of Essex over from stem to stern, and cogitated deeply. Ned's hopes rose. The officer did not seem to think it worth while to board the smack.

"Haf you seen any oder British vessels—sheeps of war?" said the German.

"Sheeps?" said Ned, gaping. "Ja, sheeps. Answer up, or it may be der vorse for you!"

"Haven't seen any sheep this morning," said the marshal, shaking his head solemnly.

"What for wooden-heads are these English fishers!" said the officer's second in command, in German, looking scornfully at Ned. "There is nothing to be got out of the fool, sir. Would you like me to search him?"

"He contains nothing but dirty fishing-nets, and I wish to proceed to Faversham," murmured the commanding officer. "It is long since we had any fresh fish, though. Here, Dummkopf," he said to Ned, "haf you any feesh?"

"Yes, some fine soles an' whittin'," said Ned, pulling a string of them out of the cockpit and holding them up.

"Ha! I buy dem. Gif der lot to my cook here—so! Fritz, let those be fried for my breakfast instantly."

"Gewiss, Herr Lieutenant," said the seaman-cook, taking the fish.

"Sheer off, Englander!" said the sub-lieutenant roughly. "Go on about your business, and take care you don't get into trouble."

"You ain't paid for the fish—three shillin's!" said Ned, waving his arms excitedly, as the destroyer glided ahead.

"Ere, come back! Three bob, I tell you!"

"Pay yourself with the foresheet," said the lieutenant; and a hoarse laugh went up from the crew at their commander's joke, while grimy, grinning faces looked back at Ned, who was shaking his fist ferociously at the destroyer.

"Dirty German thieves—oughter be keelhauls!" cried Ned; but at the same time the foresheet had drawn over, and the Maid of Essex was slipping rapidly away past Shellness. Soon she was round the corner, and heading out to open sea by the narrow swatchway of Ham Gat.

Once there, Ned's pretended wrath gave way to laughter, and he grinned till his cheeks cracked.

"Is it safe to come out, Ned?" said Sam's voice from the cabin.

"Better not show yourself outside the steerin'-well yet, sir, anyhow. But we've left the sausage-fed brutes behind."

"My aunt! You got us through beautifully!" said Stephen, putting his head out. "We heard every word in here, an' it was ticklish work waitin'."

"Good for you, Ned of Northey!" said Cavendish. "You ought to be in the Service. I'm afraid you've lost three bobs' worth of fish; we ought to subscribe that, you chaps."

Ned chuckled.

"It's a pleasure to do such swabs as them," he said. "The fish was stinkin'. They was some I forgot to throw overboard, an' there was some smear-dabs, caught off the sewage-creek, that'll make that goggle-eyed commander sick for a week if he eats 'em."

The ship's company grinned. The Maid of Essex was now slipping away fast, and had left Shellness nearly a couple of miles behind.

"Won't he swear when he finds it out," said Stephen appreciatively. "Wonder they didn't spot it. I say, here she comes out again!" he added looking back at the point, where the destroyer, now looking a mere cockboat in the distance, steamed into view again. "The cook must have complained to the Herr Lieutenant that he's been done in the eye."

Puff! came a jet of smoke from the destroyer's side, and a shell hummed through the air and fell short of the smack, and fully fifty yards wide. Another followed, but hardly a better shot.

"There's a vindictive terror for you!" said Sam. "Trying

to send a peaceful trader to the bottom, just because the fish wasn't fresh!"

"Glad of the excuse for a bit of sport, I s'pose," said Stephen.

"Nothin' to worry about," said Cavendish, munching a ship's biscuit. "He won't hit us with his three-pounders at this distance, an' we're out of harm's way, unless he leaves his post an' follows us."

"He can't do that," said Ned, "unless he goes miles out round the Columbine Sand, an' down the other side, for I'll lay he don't know the way through Ham Gat. We've got the shoal between us an' him, an' he can't cross over."

"Then we'll leave him to rub his nose in the fish an' swear," said Stephen, "which is the only consolation left him. I say, though; it proves he knows nothin' yet of the affair at Sheerness last night. If he did, he wouldn't have let any craft go out without searchin' her top an' bottom."

"Of course, he don't know; how should he?" said Sam. "He's been there all night. But I wonder they haven't—ah, there they come!"

He pointed to the north-west, where, far out beyond the Sheppey shallows, and coming as hard as they could pelt down the Four Fathom Channel, out at sea, three fast German destroyers came into view.

"Makin' for the mouth of the Swale to try an' catch us," said Cavendish, with a nod. "The crew of the one that was wrecked under the bridge must have got back an' given the news. Three of their thirty-knot boats. Ain't they giving 'em ginger! too!"

"Ah, they wouldn't tackle the passage through the Swale," said Sam. "Lucky for them; they'd have all got piled up. So they're comin' round by sea outside the island."

"They're after us, then?" said Stephen.

"They're after No. 667. We'd better keep out of sight in the cockpit, in case they spot anything unusual. They're sure to con us through their glasses, and torpedo-crews don't look what you might call natural on a fishing-smack."

"What will they do?"

"Join with the fat swab we sold the fish to. Some of 'em'll go potterin' up the Swale in their boats till they find No. 667. One or two'll scoot down along the coast to see if we've gone that way, an' very likely get embroiled with Frankie."

They watched the three destroyers rush on into the distance till past the Spanish Shoal, and then turn sharp southwards for the Swale mouth. The Maid of Essex, to avoid them, had been forced to leave her eastward course for the time, and run up the other way towards the Thames, for it would not have done to pass too close to them. All hands were glad to see the last of the destroyers, but the pace of the Maid of Essex became slower as the breeze failed, till at last her sails flapped idly.

"What about gettin' down to the Foreland?" said Cavendish.

Ned scratched his ear.

"This breeze ha' left us in the lurch," he said. "We had to go out of our way to dodge those swabs, an' here's the flood-tide comin' up strong agin us towards the Thames."

"Great Scott, we don't want to be swept up that way," said Stephen. "We should be nabbed, sure as a gun!"

"Well, there's no gettin' down to the Straits with wind an' tide right against us," said Sam, "an' it's too hot altogether about here. We'd better stand over northwards to the Essex coast for an hour or two, an' then we'll stand a better chance of gettin' down to the squadron after dark. Savvy, Cavendish?"

"All in the day's work," said the young naval officer. "I'm dead beat myself, so, if the skipper don't object, I'll turn in for a spell."

They hardly knew how tired they were till the tension was removed, and now that the danger was past for the time being, they could hold out no longer, but fell asleep where they sat. Ned, the only one who had had a night's rest, roused Cavendish and Stephen enough to get them into the cabin bunks, and he took the helm himself. Sam refused to budge, and went comfortably to sleep lying along the cabin-top, where he snored in blissful oblivion of Germans, warships, raids, admirals, and all other troubles of the kind.

The Kaiser's Yacht Comes on the Scene.

Ned sat at the tiller, and stood straight out for the Essex coast, which, low-lying and several miles distant, was invisible in the haze. His course took him right across the Thames' mouth, well outside it, and far up towards the Nore he could see two German cruisers, a battleship, and a host of torpedo craft lying watchfully at the gates of the great river.

"A few more nights like the young gents ha' just had, murmured Ned, "an' I reckon the Dutchies'd get the jumps an' allow it was too hot for 'em up here. I wonder the

beggars have dared to take an' use the place as if it were their own; but by the success they've had, they oughter know their business. Their main beel'll meet ours away north, I s'pose."

He looked rather anxiously at the torpedo-boats in the distance, trying to convince himself that none of them would stop and search him. It was a hornets' nest of a place to be in, considering the crew he carried; but there was no help for it, and, much as he despised steam, Ned had to admit it would have been very useful just then, for neither tide nor wind would have mattered, and the Maid could have gone where she liked.

"Thank goodness, there's some of the Leigh bawleys out!" said Ned to himself, looking at four or five rakish-looking smacks, with tall topmasts, out in the Barrow Deep. They were the Leigh shrimpers, out trawling; for, war or no war, the men of the sea had to get their living, and never was fish so welcome as food as in those times of famine.

"That's in my favour; if the Dutchies don't interfere with them, they may let me alone, too. There's a Maldon smack yonder—the Isabel. She's the image of the Maid, an' was built in the same yard. If these young gents was to come to harm on my boat, I'd never hold up my head again!"

A delicate snore from Sam was the only reply. Ned had all the anxiety on his hands now, and he felt it pretty keenly. One of the torpedo-boats came rushing along, and passed within three hundred yards, but she seemed to pay no attention to the Maid of Essex.

As the day wore on slowly, the weather grew thicker and thicker. The gloomy winter haze made all distances look alike. The tide edged the smack nearer and nearer up towards the Thames mouth, and Ned had to point her higher towards the wind to counteract it. However, he was approaching the lonely Essex shore all the time, and made fairly good headway. Now and then a torpedo-boat would pass outwards to sea, and the waves thrown up by one of them that came closer than usual made the smack plunge violently, and the rattle of her boom and blocks woke Sam.

"Hallo, Ned, how are we hittin' it?" he said, rubbing his eyes. "I dreamt I was ashore at Greyfriars, an' some ass was shakin' the bed."

"We're gettin' there by degrees, sir. Torpedo-boats just passed. It's gettin' thicker. When the tide turns, we'll have a good chance o' gettin' down to the eastward, an' findin' the British squadron; but it won't be high water for an hour yet."

Stephen and Cavendish, looking very sleepy, came out of the cabin and listened to what Ned was saying.

"We ought to pick up Frankie by midnight, then," said the latter; "and if he'll—What vessel's that?"

All four turned suddenly and stared at a large, very smart-looking white steamer, with a graceful cutaway bow, and varnished deck-houses, that seemed to have dropped from the clouds. She was not more than four hundred yards away, and had apparently come up behind through the haze. The German Royal ensign floated from her poop-staff.

"Have the beauties taken to yachtin' in our waters?" said Cavendish, in surprise. "Are they so blessed sure of us? They're spottin' us through glasses, confound it!" he added. "Oh, blazes! Why didn't we stay below another five minutes?" muttered Stephen. "Now we've fairly done for ourselves. Sam, they've recognised us. They're turnin' to come after us!"

"Great Scott, you're right!" said Sam, in dismay. "It's the Kaiser's yacht—the one that brought him to Maldon!" "Kaiser's yacht!" said Cavendish, in amazement. "Do you know her?"

"She picked us up in the Blackwater," said Stephen gloomily. "We escaped from her, but there ain't a man of her crew that don't know us by sight, an' they know who we are, too! No good hidin' now, Sam; they've recognised us. There's no escape from her, that's a dead certainty!"

"Keep goin', Ned," said Sam desperately; "p'raps she hasn't spotted us, after all. Bear up, an' get all the speed out of her you can!"

The swift, white, graceful vessel increased her speed and came straight down towards the smack. A line of coloured flags suddenly ran up to her masthead.

"International code," said Sam gloomily. "Can you read 'em, Cavendish?"

The lieutenant read out slowly from the fluttering signal the fatal words:

"Heave to, or take the consequences!"

How the Kaiser's Yacht Followed Too Close.

"Take the consequences!" echoed Sam, with a bitter laugh. "We know what they are. It makes no odds to us, captured or sunk! Hold on your course, Ned, an' don't leave to!"

"There'll be no gettin' out of her porthole this time,"

said Stephen gloomily, looking back at the oncoming yacht, with the fateful signal fluttering at her masthead as a menace of death. "No; better go ahead an' let her wipe us out, than give in."

He checked himself a moment as he glanced at Cavendish, and a misgiving seized him. The late commander of No. 667 would be in no danger if made a prisoner. He was a recognised member of the Navy, and would not be shot when captured. Had they the right to sacrifice him in their own hopeless case? The young naval officer saw the glance, and spoke before Sam had time to open his lips.

"Keep her going," he said coolly; "I'd as soon be sunk as captured. We're all in it."

"It's only a matter of minutes," said Sam, glancing back at the yacht. "Surrenderin' to a warship might be bearable, but to a forsaken penny steamer like that—why, she's only a civilian herself!"

"She's an Emperor's yacht," said Stephen grimly; "an' I s'pose she can settle our hash as well as a battleship could. Well, let her! Does she carry guns, d'you think?"

"Not likely—they'd be no use to her. She'd have fired across us if she had any," said Cavendish, seating himself comfortably on the cabin-top with his back against the mast as calmly as if there were no enemy within ten miles.

He looked critically back at the stately white vessel, which was now barely three hundred yards away, and relentlessly following the smack, overhauling her rapidly.

"No guns! Then she means to cut us down," muttered Stephen.

"Hope the Maid of Essex takes us down with her," was the only comment Sam made; "I don't want to stand on the Kaiser's decks as a prisoner—that's all I ask."

"Will he be aboard, d'you think?"

"Don't know. Not likely. His officers aboard have spotted us, an' that's the main thing. Counted the buttons on our coats by this time, probably."

"Look at that duck on the bridge, goggling through a pair of binoculars," said Cavendish blandly. "Wonder why all Germans are shortsighted? Even in the Navy they've never got proper blinkers. Well, if they do get us aboard, they'll prolong the agony, I suppose."

"Why?" said Stephen.

"Because, my son, they probably haven't any proper firin'-party, an' they'll have to turn us over to a fightin'-ship, or cart us ashore an' let a squad of flat-footed infantry pop off at us. Fancy being outed by soldiers! I really couldn't face a disgrace like that, dear boy, an' so I fervently echo your brother's wish that this tarry old smack will take us to the bottom with her."

"Don't rot—it's serious!" said Stephen impatiently. He was not yet quite used to marine warfare.

"My dear chap, you mustn't ask impossibilities of me. When you were ashore pullin' guns about an' makin' raids on Maldon, nobody asked you to be serious. When there's nothing to be done, do it cheerfully."

The absolute indifference of Cavendish, now there was nothing they could do to help themselves, impressed both boys, for they had seen how strenuously he could work when real efforts were needed. But the hopeless interval during which the Maid of Essex was sliding sullenly along through the breeze, and the long, white yacht was overtaking her, was a strain on Stephen's nerves.

"She's picking us up pretty fast," said Cavendish; "we ought to have a sweepstake on the time. I give us fifty seconds more."

"She ain't got us yet," said Ned stolidly.

It was the first time the marshalman had spoken since the signal was flown. He sat at his tiller, never glancing back, and, with a slightly-altered course, steered due north-west towards the invisible Essex coast.

"Why, Ned, where are we?" exclaimed Sam suddenly, glancing round him. "Where's the Mouse Lightship?"

"Ay, where is it?" was all Ned said.

"It ought to be a mile to the south'ard of us, surely. My word! Have the Germans done away with it? There are no buoys in sight, either!"

"Eh?" said Stephen, startled. "We must be jolly near the Mouse Sands, then!"

"Right over the top of 'em now," grunted Ned. "There ain't a foot o' water under the bottom of our keel."

"My Aunt Eliza!" said Cavendish, looking suddenly alert again, and glancing back at the steam-yacht. "Doesn't that dandy know it? What's she draw?"

"A good nine feet!" said Sam, with sudden excitement. "An' either she don't know we're cuttin' over the shoal, or she's too busy to think of it. Look at her!"

"Shall we scrape over? Had I better sound with the pole?" exclaimed Stephen.

"Great guns, no, sir! Don't do anything to let her dream there's shallow water here!" said Ned anxiously. "She's followin' on a treat! There's water enough for us, I tell you!"

Breathlessly they watched the yacht as she surged after them. Would she smell danger, and go round and cut them off, after all? Or would she strand herself?

A landsman might have laughed at the idea of any danger of stranding. They were seven miles off the nearest point of the Essex coast, yet between them and the distant land a wide tract of stoney-hard sand lurked just beneath the surface—the Mouse Shoal.

It was dry at low water, but now the tide covered it to a depth of some five feet, and the Maid of Essex was even now passing it, for there was just depth enough for her. Many a ship has gone to pieces on it in heavy weather.

In times of peace the Mouse Lightship marks the position of this deathtrap, but in war such warnings are generally lone away with. Whether British or Germans had removed the lightship, she was gone, though some that guarded other shoals remained.

Onward through the haze sped the Maid of Essex, the dragging wave behind her quarters showing to Ned's practical eye how shallow the water was. The Kaiser's yacht came on at full speed in hot pursuit. Her chase had been a short one, and even as the smack entered the shallow water the pursuer was all but upon her quarry.

"Smack ahoy! Heave to and surrender, or we cut you down!"

The harsh, roaring voice came from the bridge, on which the boys recognised at a glance the yacht's skipper, whose prisoner they had been in the Blackwater. His tall form and black peaked beard seemed to loom almost on top of them, and the leaping, white prow of the yacht, with the curl of foam dancing before it, was but a few yards away.

"Surrender, or there's the yardarm for you!" roared the voice in excellent English.

"Come an' fetch us, Blueface!" called Cavendish cheerfully.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when there was a mighty surge and a heave astern. The yacht's deep keel struck on the hidden shoal, and with her engines going at full speed she seemed to hoist herself clean up out of the water and then heel over to starboard, while the funnel nearly lurched out of her at the sudden stoppage. A shout of laughter came from Cavendish, and the others raised a rousing cheer.

"Get out an' push, you gardeners!" yelled Stephen.

"Put her on a barrow an' shove her over!"

Amid frantic ringings of the engine-room bell and fierce shouts from the skipper, the yacht seemed suddenly turned into a stirred-up beehive. Men were running aft with hawsers, and the screw churned up the water furiously as the engines were put full speed astern. But no engines in the world could have budged the vessel, for she was twisted half out of her draught, and remained immovable as a rock, leaning gracefully over to one side.

"Verfluchte British brats!" roared the skipper. "Potz-tausend! They've done us again! Get a rifle, some of you, and pick the steersman off."

"By-by, Baby Bunting!" called Stephen, wagging his fingers at the frantic skipper as the Maid of Essex dived on into the thickening haze. "Go an' steep that face in the harness-cask an' the beef'll frizzle into Irish stew! Sam, pass me my carbine!"

He rested his cheek against the weapon's short stock, and a man who came tumbling up on to the yacht's deck with a rifle in his hand, threw his arms up and pitched headlong on to his face as Stephen's carbine spoke.

A bullet from the rifle of another German smacked through the mainsail just above Ned's head, and a second shot chipped the tiller; but before much more shooting could be done the yacht and smack were mere hazy outlines in the grey, for the distance grew greater, for a regular North Sea fog-breeze was blowing up from seaward.

There was a final chorus of execration from the yacht's crew, and aimless bullets came flying wide through the haze; while, just as the yacht was lost to view, her steam-siren opened a long, melancholy howl that echoed over the sea.

"Callin' for assistance an' torpedo-boats to come an' mop us up," said Sam.

"They'll never find us if this mist holds," said Cavendish. "Give us that fist of yours again, Mr. Ned of Northey! By gum! I say, it's the biggest scandal ever heard of that you aren't in the Service! The way you spoofed that flag-waggin' Dutchman was gorgeous—left him up-ended on the very top of it! I'd respect you, even if you were an admiral!"

"Wasn't it great? Don't we grow the right sort in Essex?" chuckled Stephen. "I say, will she float off with the risin' tide?"

"Not she! Not even at the top o' high water, I reckon!" said Ned. "Even so, it's odds she's strained herself too bad to float. She's out of our way for a bit, anyhow!"

"Thanks to you, Ned," answered Stephen. "Tisn't the

NOW YOU'VE FINISHED LEAVE ME WITH YOUR CHUM.

first tight place you've pulled us out of. This mist is lucky for us, even now. I reckon old Bluebeard wishes he'd begun to shoot earlier. Made so precious sure of catching us."

"If that wasn't a fluke, you're a mighty useful hand with a carbine, youngster!" said Cavendish, who had been much impressed by the cadet's performance.

"Steve was our crack shot at Greyfriars, an' won the Public Schools' Cup at Bisley," said Sam. "That seems a long way off now, don't it? He's improved lately. I say, Ned, where are you bound? We aren't out of the wood yet, by long chalks!"

"You say these beastly little torpeder-boats'll be out searchin' for us, sir?" queried the marshman.

"Don't abuse 'em; they're useful at times," chuckled Cavendish.

"They'll be scourin' the whole place for us pretty soon," said Sam.

"Well, then, sir, there's only one spot where we can be anyways safe. It won't do to trust this fog, which may lift an' give us away any time. We'll have to nip into the Havens."

"S'pose that's our only chance," agreed Stephen.

"Where are the Havens?" said Cavendish.

"They're a good bit off your beat," replied Sam; "they're the mouths of three lonely creeks by Foulness, right ahead of us over the Maplin Sands. 'There'll be water enough for us to reach 'em now."

"Won't they be watched?"

"There's a good many German sodgers between there an' Shoeburyness," said Ned; "but the sodgers ain't likely to ha' heard that we're wanted. I lay for a day an' night in Wakering Haven on my outward journey, an' they took no notice o' me an' my old smack."

"They're likely to take a good deal of notice of her this time, after the games she's been up to," opined the young naval officer.

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