

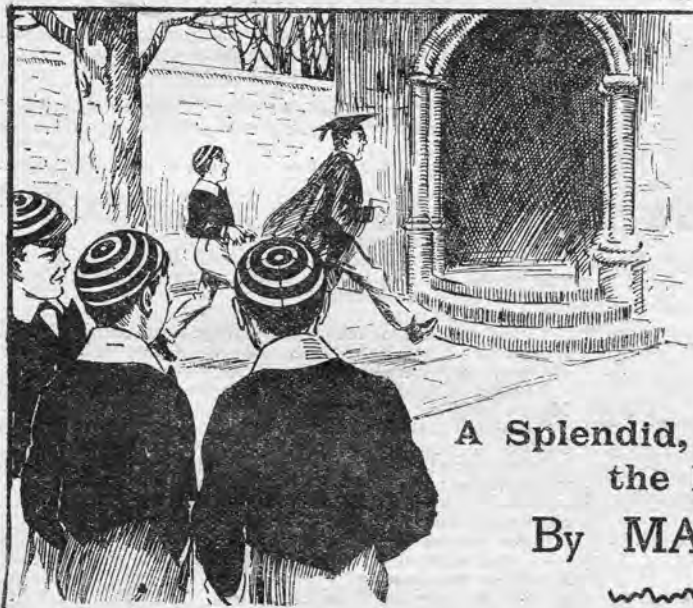
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THURSDAY

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JACK BLAKE'S LITTLE DODGE!

A Splendid, Long, Complete Tale of
the Boys of St. Jim's
By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

D'Arcy is Trodden Upon.

"I 'M thinkin' of takin' you fellows to a circus."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, made that observation, with a thoughtful expression upon his aristocratic face.

He made it to half a dozen juniors of St. Jim's, who were standing in a group outside the School House, chatting.

There were Blake, and Digby, and Herries, of the Fourth. D'Arcy's own special chums, who had the honour and advantage of sharing Study No. 6 with him. There were Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther—the Terrible Three—of the Shell Form. They were all talking football—all at once, as a matter of fact, and as Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came up, he had the benefit of the following fragments of conversation:

"As for his kicking—"

"You see—"

"When it comes to dribbling the ball—"

"What I say is this, that—"

"And, after all, as Figgins said—"

"My opinion is—"

It was into the midst of that somewhat mixed conversation that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy hurled his remark.

"I 'M thinkin' of takin' you fellows to a circus."

The six juniors all left off talking football, and stood quite still, and stared at Arthur Augustus, in a way that would have disconcerted anybody but the swell of St. Jim's.

But D'Arcy simply put up his eyeglass, and returned their scrutiny.

"It's a wippin' aftahnoon," he remarked. "The woads are too bad for cyclin', but we can get the twain to Wayland. I'm goin' to take you chaps."

As Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was the very youngest of the party, there was a certain amount of coolness in the way he put it. But that was D'Arcy's way.

"I twust," he went on, "that you will try not to give me

a lot of twouble. It's goin' to be a wippin' aftahnoon, as I remarked, and if you chaps will keep out of mischief, we shall have a jollay good time ovah there."

Still the juniors did not speak. They only stared fixedly at the swell of the School House.

"I suppose you'd like to come," said Arthur Augustus.

"You all enjoyed the circus when it was here at the school, and we agreed that we would pay it a visit while it was stayin' at Wayland. I'm quite willin' to take you."

"My only hat!" said Monty Lowther. "The best thing I can think of, under the circs, is to bump him."

"Jolly good idea," said Tom Merry heartily.

Arthur Augustus retreated in alarm.

"Pway don't play the giddy ox!" he exclaimed. "I am goin' to give you a tweat by takin' you to the circus. Now—"

"Bump him!" said Manners.

The three Shell fellows advanced upon Arthur Augustus, who retreated towards the School House steps, eyeing them warily. Blake, Herries, and Digby looked on. The swell of the School House looked at them through his eyeglass.

"I twust, Blake, that you are not goin' to join in a silly wag!" he exclaimed. "Keep off, you silly asses! Wescue, deah boys!"

Jack Blake shook his head.

"I'm not interferin' in this," he remarked. "I'm merely a looker-on in Vienna, as the chap says in the play. I think you need bumpin'." He glanced at his chums. "What do you think, Digby?"

"I think he needs bumpin'," said Digby solemnly.

"What do you think, Herries?"

"I think he needs bumpin'," said Herries. "What do you think yourself, Gussy?"

"I think you are a set of wotten wottahs," said D'Arcy.

"I twust, Tom Mewwy, that you will not compel me to give you a feahful thwashin'."

"Collar him!"

A DOUBLE-LENGTH TALE OF TOM MERRY NEXT THURSDAY.

No. 97 (New Series.)

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Arthur Augustus backed quickly away. He did not observe, in his haste, that he was backing towards the steps of the School House. He discovered it, however, when his heels clicked on the lowest step, and he sat down suddenly, with a bump that brought a gasp from him.

"Ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you uttah asses!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus sat on the lowest step, still gasping. The concussion on the cold stone had considerably jarred him. A youth in big spectacles—whose spectacles did not seem to assist his vision much—came out of the School House and descended the steps.

"Look out, Skimpole!" shouted Tom Merry.

But Skimpole, of the Shell, was buried in thought—thinking out plans for new aeroplanes, or schemes of social amelioration—those being the favourite subjects of Skimpole, of the Shell.

He walked right on—on D'Arcy.

He gave a sort of gasp as he trod on D'Arcy's back instead of the lowest step, and pitched forward.

"Oh! Oh, dear!"

He fell round D'Arcy's neck from behind, clutching him frantically, and rolling with him off the steps, into a puddle left by late rain.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave a fearful yell.

His silk hat crumpled up like cardboard under Skimpole's weight, and his fancy waistcoat was flattened out against the ground, and his nose was driven into the mud of the puddle.

Skimpole sprawled over him, in a state of great astonishment.

"Dear me!" ejaculated Skimpole. "This is most surprising! I must have trodden upon something!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! Get off!"

"Who is that speaking?"

"Ow! Get off!"

"Dear me," said Skimpole, adjusting his spectacles, "I am resting upon D'Arcy! This is most remarkable!"

"Ow!"

"I trust you are not hurt, D'Arcy."

"Yow! Gerroff!"

"Certainly."

Skimpole rolled off and rose to his feet, and Jack Blake gave a hand to his unfortunate chum.

Arthur Augustus was a shocking sight.

His face, and his collar, and his waistcoat were dripping with mud, and the knees of his trousers were caked. His silk topper lay on the ground—a mere wreck.

And the unsympathetic juniors roared. It was certainly very funny—to all except Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. Even Skimpole smiled.

"Dear me," he said, "this is—is ludicrous. Really, D'Arcy, I should have imagined you to have too much sense to play tricks like this."

"Twicks!" roared D'Arcy.

"Yes. It is a dangerous trick to sit on a step to trip people up," said Skimpole severely. "I might have broken my spectacles, or even my neck."

"No such luck," said Monty Lowther.

"Really, Lowther, I consider—"

"You uttah ass—"

"Really, D'Arcy—"

"I wasn't playin' a twick, you feahful duffah! I was sittin' there—"

"A most dangerous place to sit—"

"I fell down there!" shrieked D'Arcy. "It was all through these wottahs! Now my clothes are simply ruined. I shall have to change before I go to the circus."

Skimpole pricked up his ears.

"The circus! You are going to Tomsonio's Circus?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Then I will come with you. I intended to visit the circus, but have unfortunately run out of money," said Skimpole, blinking at the grinning juniors through his big spectacles. "I was intending to explain to them that under Socialism all circuses will be nationalised, and free admission granted to everybody. I intended to claim my right of free entrance. If, however, I go with you, you can pay for my admission in case of any absurd objections on their part."

"You uttah ass!"

"Really, D'Arcy, I cannot but regard that as almost rude. I—"

"I'm going to change my beastly clothes, you fellows. If you are weady in half an hour, I'll take you to the circus."

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy went into the School House.

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CHAPTER 2.

Detained!

TOM MERRY chuckled as the swell of St. Jim's disappeared.

"Accidents will happen, especially to Gussy's toppers," he remarked. "All the same, it's a good idea to go to the circus this afternoon. The ground's in a villainous state for footer, and the roads in beastly condition for cycling. Besides, we told young Talbot that we should visit the circus once more."

"Good!" said Jack Blake. "There's nothing else to do, unless we rake up a row with the New House."

"It's a long time since we had a House row," remarked Digby—"days, I think."

"Then the question is, shall we rag Figgins & Co., and the New House bounders, or go to the circus?" said Manners.

Tom Merry wrinkled his brows over that important problem. School House and New House were always ready for a row, and as Digby remarked, it was a curious thing that there had not been a House row for days. It seemed to show that the times were out of joint, so to speak.

"Toss up for it," suggested Monty Lowther.

"That's not a bad idea."

"Hallo, kids!" exclaimed a sturdy junior, coming out of the School House. "I'm going over to Wayland to see the circus. Coming?"

It was Harry Noble, of the Shell, more familiarly known as Kangaroo.

"We're just thinking it out, Kangy," said Tom Merry.

"You're not going alone? Where are Dane and Glyn?"

The Cornstalk laughed.

"Oh, Glyn's making an experiment in electricity, and won't come out, and Dane is looking after one of his blessed pets that's got the measles."

"Measles!"

"Well, measles, or mumps, or something," said Kangaroo cheerfully. "I'm not particular. Something, anyway. Are you chaps going to the circus?"

"Either that, or a row with Figgins & Co.," said Tom Merry, laughing. "We were going to toss up for it."

"Why not both?" said Kangaroo. "A House row first, to liven us up, and then a run over to the circus."

"Jolly good wheeze. That will fill up the time while we're waiting for Gussy," said Blake cordially. "We'll go over to the New House, and call on the bounders. I think old Ratty's out—"

Blake caught an agonised expression upon Kangaroo's face, and stopped. He turned his head in the direction Kangaroo was looking.

"Oh, my only hat!" he murmured. "Ratty!"

Mr. Ratcliff, the House-master of the New House—disrespectfully referred to as Ratty—was glaring at Blake in silent wrath. Mr. Ratcliff had a very silent tread, and he frequently turned up like this in unexpected places.

"Blake!"

"Yes, sir."

"Were you referring to me?"

"I, sir?"

"Yes, you," said Mr. Ratcliff savagely. "Is it possible that you dare to refer to a House-master in such a manner?"

"Oh, sir."

"Answer my question, Blake."

"Yes, sir."

"Ah!" said Mr. Ratcliff. "Now, if I were your House-master, Blake, I should cane you most severely for using such a disrespectful expression. As it is, my only resource is to report you to your own House-master."

Blake looked dismayed. There was no love lost between the two House-masters at St. Jim's; but Mr. Railton of the School House was certain to visit any disrespect with a heavy hand. Blake had not really meant to be disrespectful; but Mr. Ratcliff was unpopular in the school, and never spoken of affectionately. Besides, as Blake thought, how was he to know that Ratty was creeping about like a cat just then?

"Oh, sir, I'm sorry," said Blake.

"Quite possible!" said Mr. Ratcliff, with a sneer. "Wrongdoers are generally sorry when they are found out. Come with me!"

"If you please, sir—"

"Follow me, Blake."

Blake exchanged a hopeless glance with his chums. Mr. Ratcliff strode off with rustling gown and wrathful face towards the School House. Blake followed. He had no choice about the matter. But he was feeling very annoyed.

"Beast!" murmured Tom Merry. "He oughtn't to take notice of anything heard by accident like that. And he oughtn't to creep about like a cat. Beast!"

"Rotter!" said Manners.

Monty Lowther burst into a chuckle.

"My hat! Look at Blake!"



Arthur Augustus gave a jump as he looked in the glass. "Bai Jove! Is that weally I?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There were answering chuckles from other parts of the quad. Jack Blake was following Mr. Ratcliff, as he had been bidden; but he was doing it his own way.

Mr. Ratcliff stalked ahead, with his peculiar jerky steps, and his nose high in the air. Blake had thrown back his head, elevating his nose and chin in absurd imitation of Mr. Ratcliff, and was walking along with jerky strides in exactly the same manner.

The New House-master had not the faintest suspicion that Blake was mimicking him, but everybody else in the quadrangle could see it, and they roared.

Mr. Ratcliff was somewhat surprised to find his progress towards the School House attended by loud laughter, but he did not at first connect it with himself.

He marched up the steps, and Blake marched after him, still in the same manner, and a yell of merriment followed them into the School House.

"Ha, ha, ha!" Tom Merry wiped his eyes. "Ho, ho, ho!" The roars of laughter in the quad drew Mr. Railton to his window. The School House-master looked out just in time to see Blake ascending the steps after Mr. Ratcliff, mimicking him in the most ridiculous manner.

The House-master could not help smiling.

"The young rascal!" he murmured, his smile soon changing to a frown. "This certainly will not do. But really, I wish Mr. Ratcliff would not take so much trouble to make himself unpopular."

Mr. Ratcliff strode into the house with rustling gown, and a fresh shriek of laughter greeted him, as Blake strode in after him.

Then some suspicion dawned upon the House-master's mind, and he turned quickly round and looked at Blake.

Blake tried to get back into normal manners and customs at once, but he was not quick enough; Mr. Ratcliff saw it all.

His sallow face went a dark crimson with rage.

"Blake! This insolence—follow me!" he said, in a choking voice.

He knocked at the door of Mr. Railton's study, and entered. Blake followed him in. Mr. Railton looked at them with a slightly worried expression.

"Mr. Ratcliff! What can I—"

"This boy has been most disrespectful," said Mr. Ratcliff, with a wave of his thin hand. "He has insulted me."

"Surely not."

NEXT THURSDAY: "TOM MERRY'S CHRISTMAS NUMBER."

THE GEM LIBRARY—No. 97.
A Grand Tale of the Boys of St. Jim's.
By MARTIN CLIFFORD. Price 1d.

"He has referred to me in my hearing by a most disrespectful term."

"Blake!"

"I'm sorry, sir," said Blake meekly. "I didn't know that Mr. Ratcliff was creeping—ahem—I mean, walking just behind me."

Mr. Railton coughed.

"But you should never refer to a master by a disrespectful expression, Blake. You know that that is very wrong."

"That is not all, sir," said Mr. Ratcliff chokingly. "He has dared to mimic me, sir, in the most ridiculous manner in following me here."

"It was only fun, sir," said Blake repentantly.

"Fun, indeed! Fun! If you were in my House, boy, I would flog you," said Mr. Ratcliff. "Yes, flog you soundly."

"Ahem!" said Mr. Railton. "Blake certainly should be punished, but—"

"Oh, I do not expect you to use proper severity!" said Mr. Ratcliff, with a sneer. "But I hope that you will at least detain Blake for the afternoon."

Jack's face fell.

He badly wanted to go to the circus that afternoon, and he knew that Mr. Ratcliff knew it, and had chosen this means of punishment as the most likely to be painful.

"Very well," said Mr. Railton quietly, "that is adequate, I think. Blake, you are detained within the house for the afternoon."

"If you please, sir—"

"Not a word. You may go."

"But, sir—"

"Leave the room."

And Jack Blake left.

"You are satisfied, Mr. Ratcliff?"

"Oh, certainly," said the New House-master. And he followed Blake out of the study, with a grim, sour smile upon his face. He left the house, leaving Jack standing looking gloomily out of the doorway into the sunny quad.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came downstairs a little later, resplendent in a fresh topcoat and a brilliant waistcoat. He tapped Blake on the shoulder with a delicately gloved hand.

"Weady, deah boy?"

"No!" grunted Blake.

"But you're coming?"

"Can't!"

"Why not?"

"Detained for the afternoon."

"Bai Jove!"

CHAPTER 3.

Mr. Ratcliff Forgets Himself.

FIGGINS of the New House came across the quad with his hands in his pockets, whistling cheerily. It was the kind of keen, cold day that makes a healthy fellow feel cheerful, and Figgins was healthy from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet. Figgins was looking for the chums of the School House, and he expected to find them in the quad somewhere; but they were not in sight. Mellish of the Fourth was eating toffee under the leafless trees, and Figgins spoke to him as he passed.

"Seen Tom Merry?"

"Yes, he's indoors," said Mellish, with a grin.

Figgins looked at him.

"What are you sniggering at?"

"Oh, nothing."

"You worm!" said Figgins, who knew that Mellish was never amused unless something unpleasant had happened to somebody. "Is anything the matter with Tom Merry?"

"Oh, no, not Tom Merry."

"Who else, then?"

"Oh, Blake's detained, that's all."

"Poor old Jacky—on an afternoon like this, too!" said Figgins, with much feeling. "It's hard cheese! What's he been doing?"

"Cheeking your House-master."

"Old Ratty! What a rotten thing to be detained for! And I wanted them to come to the circus," said Figgins regretfully.

"Oh, you're going over to the circus?"

"Yes, at Wayland."

"I'll come with you, if you like."

Figgins gave the cad of the Fourth a look of disdain.

"I jolly well don't like," he said. "You won't come with me. I believe it was you played that cowardly trick with the fireworks in Blake's study when the circus was here, and nearly injured Miss Clotide."

Mellish shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't see why you should put it down to me," he said sullenly.

"Well, I don't see who else could have been cad enough," said THE GEM LIBRARY—No. 97

said Figgins frankly. "I'm not sure, of course. If I were sure you did it, I should wipe up the ground with you now."

Mellish hastily backed away. Figgins went on towards the School House. He found the chums of the Shell and the Fourth in the entrance, all of them looking decidedly glum.

They all glared at Figgins.

"Blessed if here isn't a New House rotter!" said Dig wrathfully. "Let's roll him out, anyway."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Bump him!"

"Hold on!" exclaimed Figgins hastily. "Pax, my sons! I've come over to see if you chaps will make up a party for the circus."

"Blake's detained," said Tom Merry. "We were going, but your beastly Ratty complained about him, and he's booked to stay in."

"Rough, I know," said Figgins. "But I suppose you're not all staying in with him. Blake really ought to have had more sense than to stir up Ratty, you know. Ratty has been simply wild to pick on you chaps ever since that affair of D'Arcy's, when the brandy-flask was found in Gussy's pocket, and Ratty reported him to the Head."

"Weally, Figgins, the bwanday-flask was not found in my pocket; it was a conjun' twick of that great ass Pye, the circus clown."

Figgins grinned.

"Ratty would rather it had been a genuine find," he said. "He was awfully let down before the Head when the facts came out. He's been watching you chaps like a cat ever since."

"I dare say he has!" growled Blake. "But how was I to know that he was creeping about behind me like a blessed cat? And how was I to guess that he would turn round and look at me just when I was mimicking him. Ratty doesn't play the game."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's no laughing matter," grunted Blake. "I'm detained. Of course, I don't want you fellows to stay in. I'll do some carpentry in my study."

"Weally, deah boy, if you will excuse us, we had better go to the circus," said Arthur Augustus thoughtfully.

"Oh, I'll excuse you with pleasure, Gussy."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Why not cut and run?" asked Figgins boldly. "You could sneak out without being noticed, you know, and once outside it would be all serene. Railton isn't likely to look in your study to see if you're there. He's not like Ratty, always spying about."

"Bai Jove! that's so, Blake, deah boy. Cut and run."

Blake thought it out.

"Well, I haven't said I'd stay in," he remarked reflectively. "If I choose to run the risk of being spotted, that's my biznay, isn't it? Railton can't complain—so long as he gives me a licking. That's his business."

"Exactly, deah boy."

"Then I think I'll jolly well hook it," said Blake.

"Bwavo!"

"Shove your cap on, and walk out in the middle of a crowd, and you won't be noticed," said Figgins. "Wait a bit, till Ratty's got his eye off you, of course. I'll meet you at the gates, then, with Kerr and Wynn, in a quarter of an hour."

"Right-ho!"

And Figgins walked back to his own House. Kerr and Fatty Wynn, his chums in the Fourth, were waiting for him at the door of the New House. There was a very thoughtful expression upon Wynn's plump face.

"Well?" said Kerr.

"They're going," said Figgins cheerily. "We're to meet

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them at the gate. What are you making that mug about, Fatty?"

Fatty Wynn started.

"I—I was thinking that we shall get hungry before we get home, Figgy. Hadn't we better cut across to the tuckshop, and have a bit of a feed before we start?"

"You porpoise! It isn't an hour since dinner."

"Well, I didn't have much dinner," said Fatty Wynn plaintively. "Only three helpings of beef, some bacon and sausages, and a couple of helpings of plum-duff, and the mince-pies and pudding. I haven't had anything since, either, except a few tarts at the tuckshop. You know, it's always a good idea to lay a solid foundation before starting out anywhere."

"Rats!" said Figgins. "By the way, have you seen Ratty?"

"He's just come in," said Kerr. "He was grinning, so I suppose he has been making trouble for somebody."

"It's Blake! Ratty's complained of him, and he's detained."

"Just like Ratty!"

"Yes. Blessed if I know why they should spring a House-master like that upon nice fellows like us," said Figgins discontentedly. "It's rough. But come in and get your coats."

They went into the House. Mr. Ratcliff's study door was open, and he called to the juniors as they passed. Unwillingly enough Figgins & Co. entered their House-master's study.

Mr. Ratcliff looked them over keenly with his gimlet eyes.

"You are going out, Figgins?"

"Yes, sir."

"To the circus at Weyland, perhaps."

"Yes, sir."

"Ah! I want you to do me a little service, Figgins."

"With pleasure, sir."

"Blake, of the Fourth Form, is detained for the afternoon," said Mr. Ratcliff. "He has been guilty of the greatest insolence towards me, your House-master. You are not, I believe, on good terms with Blake."

Figgins's lip curled a little. He certainly had plenty of rows with Blake and the other fellows in the School House, but there was nothing like ill-feeling between them. Mr. Ratcliff was on quite the wrong scent.

"Well, we have rows sometimes, sir," said Figgins.

"Ah, yes! Now, Figgins, I have a suspicion that Blake will attempt to escape his detention this afternoon."

"Indeed, sir!"

"Yes. It would be difficult, or, rather, impossible for me to keep any kind of surveillance upon him in the School House, and I am sure that Mr. Railton will not give a thought to the matter at all. Now, I particularly want to know if Blake breaks bounds. If he does so, he will certainly go to the circus. I want you to report to me when you return if you saw Blake there."

Figgins stood petrified for a moment.

He could hardly believe that the House-master was really asking him to play the part of a spy and a sneak.

But when it fully dawned on his mind, his eyes blazed and his cheeks flushed crimson.

Mr. Ratcliff was watching him sourly, and he was startled by the boy's look.

"You understand me, Figgins?"

"Yes," said Figgins, between his teeth. "You want me to spy and tell tales."

The House-master started.

"Figgins!"

"And I'll be cut in pieces first!" said Figgins recklessly. "You can lick me if you like, but you won't catch me tale-bearing."

Mr. Ratcliff clenched his hands convulsively. He did not understand boy nature much, and he understood a fellow like Figgins least of all. Mellish, of the Fourth, would have accepted the commission with avidity; Figgins would have died first. But Mr. Ratcliff never could understand that all boys were not cast in the same mould.

"Figgins, how dare you? I—I will flog you! I—"

"You can flog me if you like," said Figgins recklessly. "You jolly well won't make me sneak, though."

"You—you insolent cub! Take that!"

And Mr. Ratcliff struck out furiously, and Figgins reeled back from a vicious blow.

CHAPTER 4.

Off to the Circus.

Figgins uttered a cry, more of surprise than pain. It was so unheard-of at St. Jim's for a master to strike a pupil in so rudely a way, that the junior had not expected that even of Ratty.

Mr. Ratcliff, the moment the blow was struck, seemed to

realise that he had gone too far. He drew back, breathing hard, with a flush in his cheeks.

"Go!" he said hoarsely. "Leave my study!"

Figgins stood looking at him. There were hot words on Figgins's tongue—words that would have got him into trouble if they had been uttered.

But Kerr and Wynn dragged their chum towards the door.

"Hold on!" muttered Figgins. "Hold on a minute—"

"Come away, Figgy!"

"I'm going to tell him—"

"You're going to tell him nothing," said Kerr, dragging his chum from the study. "You can't slang a House-master. Bring him along, Wynn."

"But—"

"Oh, come on, Figgy!"

"Shut that door!" said Mr. Ratcliff.

None of the three heeded him. They went down the passage. The House-master did not call after them. He closed the door himself.

Figgins's ear was burning, and his eyes were burning too. He came to a stop at last at the foot of the stairs, out of hearing of the House-master's study. His chums allowed him to halt there.

"What do you think of the beast?" said Figgins.

"Beastly!" said Kerr. "But I think he was sorry as soon as he had biffed your napper. It was going pretty strong, even for Ratty."

"We're not supposed to stand that sort of thing," said Figgins. "It would serve him right if I complained to the Head. Only a chap can't sneak."

"I believe he's half afraid you're going to," chuckled Kerr.

"It would get him into a row with the doctor," observed Wynn. "Dr. Holmes wouldn't allow it if he knew. But Ratty forgot himself; and as a matter of fact, Figgy, you did put it to him rather straight, you know."

"Well, the cad," said Figgins hotly, "fancy asking a chap to sneak for him!"

"It was the limit, and no mistake."

"My hat!" exclaimed Figgins. "I've a jolly good mind now to go back and tell him what I think of him."

"That you jolly well won't!" said Kerr, getting hold of his arm again. "You're coming with us. Come and get your coat on."

"Yes, but—"

"Oh, give him a shove along, Fatty!"

And Figgins was dragged off. He was cooling down, however, and he soon realised that it would not be exactly prudent to go and tell a House-master what he thought of him. But he was still simmering with wrath, and his ear was still very red, when the chums left the New House in their coats and caps to go to the circus.

The School House fellows were outside the gates of St. Jim's.

Jack Blake wore a cap with flaps over his ears, pulling it low over his face, and a huge coat with the collar turned up. He was very nearly unrecognisable, and he had passed the quad. without being noticed.

"Hallo, here's Figgins!" said Tom Merry. "Let's get off before Ratty starts coming nosing round. Anything wrong, Figgy?"

"Yes; Ratty."

And Figgins related the enormities of Ratty as the party tramped down the muddy lane towards Rylcombe.

The indignation of the juniors at the unspeakable conduct of Ratty was very great; but Arthur Augustus D'Arey took it the most seriously of all.

"He actually struck you, Figgins?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, rather!"

"I regard it as an outrage," said D'Arey; "the most fearful outrage I have ever heard of since the days when it was open to a gentleman to defend his honour with his own right arm."

"Hear, hear!"

"I considah that Watty has passed the limit, and that wewpresentations should be made to Dr. Holmes that Watty should be pwessed to send in his wesignation."

"Good egg!"

"I am quite willin' to get up a wound wobin for the purpose," said D'Arey. "It would be signed by nearly ewewybody in the school."

"What ho!"

"By George," said Kangaroo, "it's not half a bad idea, either! A round rob'n signed by all the Lower Forms would make Ratty sit up."

"And would prevent some of us from being able to sit down, I expect," said Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Of course, we could not pay any heed to considerations of that sort, when it is a question of a fellow's dig."

"My idea," said Blake gravely, "is that Figgins should

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NEXT THURSDAY: "TOM MERRY'S CHRISTMAS NUMBER." A G and Tale of the Boys of St. Jim's. By MARTIN CLIFFORD. Price 1d.

send him a challenge. Mr. Ratcliff has disgraced his profession and dishonoured the country he was born in, and there is nothing for it but to call him out."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I suggest that after the circus Gussy should call upon Mr. Ratcliff as Figgins's friend, and make the necessary arrangements."

"Hear, hear!"

"I should wegard it as an honah to act for Figgins," said D'Arcy. "I considah—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, so you are wottin', you wottah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And D'Arcy walked on with his nose very high in the air. The juniors lost no time in getting to Rylcombe, where they caught the local train for Wayland. Blake heaved a sigh of relief as the train steamed out of the station.

"Can't be a row now till after the circus," he remarked. "I don't mind doing five hundred lines, if it comes to that. You fellows can all help."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I think there will be a good many St. Jim's fellows over there," remarked Kangaroo. "I saw several school caps in this train as we got in. There were some of our fellows on the platform, too, just in time as we were. Gore was among them."

"If Goah is in the twain, deah boys, I considah that it would be only the pwopah thing to ask him to join our partay."

Some of the juniors looked doubtful.

Gore, of the Shell, had always been a most unpleasant character, and Tom Merry & Co. had been on the worst of terms with him. Of late he had turned over a new leaf; but the juniors did not feel exactly like chumming with him. But Tom Merry nodded approval of D'Arcy's suggestion.

"Right-ho!" he said. "We'll look out for him."

"Since the time he apologised to Miss Clotilde for his wudeness to her, I wegard him as appwoachin' bein' a decent chap," said D'Arcy. "He was a beast, I know, but an apology makes it all wight."

"Good old Chesterfield!"

"If you intend that wemark in a dispawagiu' sense, Lowthah—"

"I intend it in a Pickwickian sense," said Lowther blandly.

"Weally, deah boy—"

"Did you put those sandwiches in your pocket, Figgy?" asked Fatty Wynn anxiously.

"By Jove! I left them on the study table!"

"Oh! Then I've only got this lot in my pocket," said Wynn, pulling out a bundle that seemed large enough to open a railway bar with. "Any of you fellows hungry?"

"Ha, ha! No!"

"Good. There will be nearly enough for me here, if you chaps don't want any. But mind, share round if you like."

"Ha, ha! Go ahead, Fatty, and we'll watch you!"

And they watched him, with great interest, as they might have watched the lions feed at the Zoo. As Lowther said, he had paid money in his time for a less interesting sight. But Fatty Wynn did not mind. He demolished the sandwiches to the last crumb, and then leaned back in his corner and went to sleep.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, letting his eyeglass fall to the end of its cord. "Bai Jove!"

Fatty Wynn snored musically till the train stopped with a sudden jerk in Wayland Station; and then he was pitched forward into Tom Merry's arms. Tom Merry pitched him back, and he bumped on the back of the seat and gasped.

"Oh, what's happened?"

"Nothing."

"Is it a collision?"

"Well, yes; I collided with a porpoise," said Tom Merry.

"Ha, ha, ha! I wegard that as wathah funnay, you know!"

The juniors streamed out of the train. Gore was in the next carriage. He stepped out and made for the exit of the platform. Tom Merry quickened his steps and tapped him on the shoulder, and Gore looked round in surprise.

"Coming with us?" asked Tom cheerily.

Gore flushed red.

"Do you want me?"

"Well, I haven't asked you because I don't want you," said Tom Merry, laughing.

"Thank you, Merry. I'd like to be with somebody."

"Good! Come along!"

Mellish, of the Fourth, had stepped out of the train. He stood regarding the chums of St. Jim's with a very unpleasant expression. He dropped into stride with Tom Merry, walking beside the hero of the Shell. Tom glanced at him in surprise.

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"I'm stony," said Mellish. "Will you stand me a circus ticket, Merry? I'll let you have it back some time."

Tom Merry felt in his pockets.

"There you are," he said, handing the shilling to Mellish. The cad of the Fourth slipped it into his waistcoat pocket.

Tom strode on. Mellish kept pace with him.

"Look here, Mellish," said Tom abruptly, "just buzz off, will you? You're not a friend of mine, and I don't want your company."

Mellish's eyes glittered.

"Is that the Merry brand of politeness?" he asked, with a sneer.

"It's the Merry brand of plain English," said Tom warmly. "You played a cowardly trick on my old governess in the School House the other day. You're a worm! I never see you without wanting to punch your head! Buzz off!"

"Good!" said Blake. "Buzz off, and consider yourself lucky you're not bumped for your cheek in jawing to decent chaps."

"Oh, so you're here, Blake! I thought you were detained."

"That's not your business, my son."

"You don't want me with you?"

"No."

"Oh, very well!"

Mellish strolled away to an automatic sweet machine, and stood fumbling with it till the juniors of St. Jim's were clear of the station. Then he crossed the line, and waited on the other side. In five minutes the local train for Rylcombe came buzzing in, and Mellish boarded it. It was a curious proceeding. He had just come from Rylcombe, and now he was going back, without having left Wayland Station. But Mellish had his own reasons for that curious proceeding.

CHAPTER 5.

The Original Mr. Pye Again.

TOM MERRY & CO. came out of Wayland Station into the quaint old High Street of the market town, a cheery group of juniors. It was not a difficult task for them to find where the circus was. Every wall in Wayland seemed to be smothered with huge blue-and-red posters, announcing that Signor Tomsonio's circus was there, and giving details of the wonderful performance to be witnessed for the small sum of one shilling.

There were Jungle Jack, the King of the Tigers, and Clotilde, the Queen of the Ring, and Carson, the King of the Trapeze, and Joey Pye, the King of Komic Kusses, as the bills had it—a whole family of kings and queens, as Lowther remarked.

The juniors had seen the circus at St. Jim's, but they were eager to see it once more, especially the turns given by the fellows whose acquaintance they had made. Talbot and Clotilde had had a study tea at St. Jim's with the School House chums, and, of course, that enhanced the interest of the performance in the boys' eyes.

"Hallo, the performance isn't till six o'clock," Manners remarked, as he ran his eye down one of the posters.

"Good!" said Fatty Wynn.

"Eh? How is it good, duffer, for us to have to wait two mortal hours?" demanded Manners warmly.

"I was thinking that there would be time for us to get some tea."

"My only hat!" said Blake. "He wants tea already! Where are those sandwiches?"

"I've eaten them."

"Don't they make any difference to you?"

"Well, a little, I suppose. Still, I'm hungry. You see, the performance lasts two solid hours, and it's no good trying to sit out that length of time without laying a solid foundation. I put it to you."

"As a mattah of fact, deah boys, I could do with somethin' myself, in the way of a cup of tea," said Arthur Augustus, "as we have to fill up the time, owin' to Tom Mewwy's miscalculation—"

"Eh, what's that?"

"You have brougt us here a couple of hours earliah than there was any necessity for, deah boy."

"Well, I like that!" said Tom Merry. "I understood that you were taking us to the circus, Gussy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove, I nevah thought of that. Upon the whole, I cannot wegard it as a miscalculation; it will enable us to have a stwoll wound and see the intwestin' sights of this extremely ancient Sussex town."

"Ha, ha! Gussy is like the King in the British Constitution—he can do no wrong."

"As a mattah of fact, deah boys, you will find that I am

generally wight. You can, as a wule, depend upon me to tell you the weally pwopah thing to do."

"Well, let's have a look for the teashop."

"Well, my only bath-bun!" exclaimed a voice suddenly, as a little plump man halted in the street and stared at the juniors. "Is it—can it be—or do my aged eyes deceive me?"

"Bai Jove, it's that chap Pye!"

Joey Pye, the clown of Tomsonio's Circus, grinned at the juniors, and carefully raised the bowler hat he was wearing on the side of the head. Mr. Pye, was, of course, not in his professional garb now. He took his walks abroad in a check suit, loud enough to be heard in the next street, as Lowther remarked sotto voce.

"It's my young friends from St. Jim's," said Mr. Pye. "It does my eyes good to see you again."

"Jolly glad to see you, kid," said Tom Merry, laughing. "We've come over to see the circus, and we find it doesn't start till six."

"Nothing like punctuality," declared Mr. Pye, with a shake of the head. "As the poet truly remarks, punctuality is the thief of time."

"Bai Jove, I thought it was pwocwastination."

"Well, I knew it was something beginning with a P," said Mr. Pye cheerfully. "I'm not particular. Were you looking for an establishment where it is possible to quench the thirst caused by a gentle stroll? If so, I should be happy to accompany you, as I also am of a dry nature."

"Yaas, wathah! Pway come with us, deah boy. I know a nice teashop, where there is a wemarkably nice gal who serves the tea."

"Good old Gussy! Is her name Ethel?" asked Blake.

"Her name is not Ethel, Blake, and I wegard your question as bein' in the worst of taste," said D'Arcy, with dignity. "Pway come this way."

And D'Arcy led the way. Mr. Pye chatted cheerily with the juniors as they followed Arthur Augustus. But a curious expression came over his face when he saw the kind of place of refreshment D'Arcy had led him to. Probably some other kind of liquid than tea had been floating before Mr. Pye's imagination.

"You'd like tea, or coffee, Mr. Pye?" asked Tom Merry, with a glimmer in his eye as he read the expression upon the clown's plump face.

"Yes, certainly," said Mr. Pye. "I never touch anything stronger—ahem—except when my medical man orders it. He orders it three times a day—ahem! Yes, I'm very fond of coffee—ahem—very!"

They crowded into the teashop. It was very nearly empty. The gas was lighted, for the early winter dusk was falling. The nice girl, to whom Arthur Augustus had alluded, came forward to take their orders, and Arthur Augustus raised his topper to her as if she had been a princess.

The waitress, with a smile, took their orders—Fatty Wynn's taking some time—and left them. D'Arcy drew off his gloves, with a thoughtful expression upon his face. Mr. Pye had seated himself beside the swell of St. Jim's, and there was a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

"It was a bit risky bringing us here, Gussy," Monty Lowther remarked.

Arthur Augustus came out of a brown study.

"Wisky, Lowthah! I fail to compwehend."

"Well, you know the old saying, never introduce your donah to a pal."

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"You see, it's a temptation to a good-looking chap like me to cut you out, you know."

"Lowthah, I wegard your wemarks as bein' vewy bad form. That young lady is a most estimable person, and I am quite sure that she would nevah look at you. I trust you do not suppose for a moment that I am on any terms but that of distant acquaintance with that young lady."

Lowther shook his head sadly.

"Well, we know what a terror you are, Gussy," he said. "Don't you remember when we were in Paris, all the ladies in the Bois de Boulogne turned their heads to look at you? They were either greatly struck, or else they were wondering what you were doing outside the Jardin des Plantes."

"You uttah ass—"

"I am afraid you are rather deceptive, Gussy," said Lowther, exchanging a wink with Mr. Pye. "Even now you have an engagement-ring in your pocket. Now, who is it for?"

"I have nothin' of the sort—I deny it! You are a wottah!"

"Turn out your pocket, then," said Lowther, who had exchanged a whisper with Mr. Pye before they sat down at the table. "You won't venture—"

"Bai Jove, there is nothin' in my pocket anybody couldn't see. You ass—"

"Excuse me, then," said Mr. Pye.

He inserted finger and thumb into D'Arcy's waistcoat-

pocket, and drew out a ring, and laid it on the table. The juniors laughed, and D'Arcy put up his eyeglass and stared at the ring in blank amazement.

"Bai Jove, you know! It's a wing!"

"Ha, ha! Who was it for, Gussy?"

"It is not mine."

"Who was the lucky person? Whom shall we congratulate?"

"Weally, deah boys, I am in a state of gweat amazement. I haven't the faintest ideah how that wing came into my pocket."

"Too thin, Gussy!"

"Tell us her name, at least."

"What letter does it begin with?"

D'Arcy turned his eyeglass indignantly from one grinning face to another.

"Weally, deah boys—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Excuse me," said Mr. Pye.

His fingers slipped into another of D'Arcy's pockets, and reappeared with a little missive tied with pink ribbon.

The juniors shrieked more at the sight of D'Arcy's face than at that of the pink-ribboned letter.

"Bai Jove!"

"Oh, Gussy, this beats the brandy-flask!"

Those words let in a flood of light upon D'Arcy's mind. He remembered the wonderful conjuring abilities of the original Mr. Pye, and he turned a wrathful eye upon the clown.

"You—you feahful wottah! You have been plantin' these things on me!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wegard you as an ass!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Pye chuckled, and put the note and the ring in his pocket. He seemed to be always provided with a variety of articles for his little jokes.

Arthur Augustus sat with an expression of unbending dignity upon his face until the waitress arrived with the tea. Then, of course, he relaxed, as it was impossible for him to look annoyed in the presence of one of the gentle sex.

CHAPTER 6.

A Roland for an Oliver.

THE "nice gal" whose arrival had banished the frown from D'Arcy's brow seemed to pay the swell of St. Jim's some extra attention. Perhaps she was a little impressed by the manners of the St. Jim's Vere de Vere. D'Arcy was as polite as a Chesterfield and a Grandison rolled into one, and as respectful as if he had been speaking to a princess. She poured out D'Arcy's tea, and handed it to him. But as it happened the result was unfortunate.

Mr. Pye at the same moment inserted his fingers into the sugar-basin and drew forth a mouse, with an expression of perfect gravity on his face. The waitress looked at the strange sight with starting eyes, and gave a great jump; and the teacup overturned in the saucer, and the contents shot into D'Arcy's lap.

"Oh!"

Arthur Augustus leaped up as the hot fluid ran down his trousers and soaked over his knees.

"Phew!" said Mr. Pye.

The mouse, which was an automatic one, ran up his sleeve and disappeared, and Mr. Pye turned an innocent glance upon D'Arcy.

"I'm so sorry, sir!" said the girl. "I—I saw a mouse in the sugar-basin."

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Blake

"Ow!"

"Oh, I hope you are not scalded!"

D'Arcy tried to twist his features into a polite smile.

"Ow! Not at—at all, deah gal—I mean, miss! Not at all! It is all wight!"

"I am so sorry—"

"It was the fault of this uttah ass!" said D'Arcy. "I weally do not blame you at all. I am sorry the tea should be wasted aftah you had been so kind as to pour it out."

"Good old Gussy!" murmured Tom Merry

The swell of St. Jim's sat down. He was feeling extremely uncomfortable, but he wanted to reassure the nice "gal."

"It is all wight," he said; "pway don't bothah!"

The nice gal looked daggers at Mr. Pye.

She understood that she had been startled by a conjuring trick now, and she was far from being amused by it, as the juniors were.

"I think I take coffee," remarked Mr. Pye. "I can smoke a cigarette with it. You don't smoke, my lads? Quite right, quite right. It's a bad habit. I only smoke

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because my medical man orders it Most obliging chap, my medical man—will order anything Yes, miss, that coffee is for me."

"Yes, sir!"

And Mr. Pye received his coffee—not as he expected it. The cup tilted over, whether by accident or not, and the mirth-merchant of Tomsonio's Circus received the coffee in his neck.

He gave a wild yell, and leaped to his feet, bumping against the table and making the crockery rock and ring.

"Ow! Oh! Yow! I'm scalded! Ow!"

"Here, steady on!"

"Ow! Roo—yaroo!"

"Bai Jove, I wegard that as poetical justice, you know!"

"Yow! Wow!"

"I'm so sorry, sir!" said the waitress, with a wicked smile.

Mr. Pye looked at her. He seemed to be about to say something, but he checked himself. He mopped at his neck with his handkerchief. The coffee was flowing down his person, and he was drenched on the chest.

"Vewy wuff!" said D'Arcy, with a smile. "Vewy wuff indeed! It is a cuwious thing how pwactical jokahs object to pwactical jokes.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I—I think I'll be getting along," said Mr. Pye weakly. "I think I need a change. I'll see you young gents at the circus. You'll find the original Joey Pye going strong. Good-bye!"

"Au revoir, old chap!"

"Never be humorous with a woman," murmured Mr. Pye sadly. "They haven't any sense of humour—especially where a mouse is involved."

And Mr. Pye took his departure, leaving the juniors of St. Jim's chuckling.

"Bai Jove, that was a Woland for an Olivah!" remarked Arthur Augustus. "I get wathah fed up with conjuwin' twicks, you know. I wondah whethah that coffee goin' ovah was weally an accident, you know?"

"I wonder?" grinned Blake.

"Pass the saveloys," said Fatty Wynn.

That was the only remark Fatty had made since he sat down at the table. The Falstaff of the New House was busy.

Provisions were disappearing at an alarming rate, and there was no doubt that if the fat Fourth-Former did not spend a pleasant evening, it would not be for want of laying a solid foundation.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Blake, who had finished his tea, and was looking round while waiting for Fatty Wynn to get through. "Hallo! Look there!"

A boy and a girl had entered the teasshop.

The juniors recognised them at a glance.

They were Jack Talbot—Jungle Jack, of the circus—and Clotilde, the Queen of the Ring.

They did not see the juniors at first; but Tom Merry jumped up immediately, and took off his cap.

"Bai Jove, it's our old fwends!" said D'Arcy. "Pway come this way, deah boy! How do you do? Pway sit at our table!"

Clotilde and Talbot greeted the juniors with unaffected pleasure. Jack Talbot, though he was following a perilous and arduous calling, was no older than the juniors, and he was a boy as boyish as they were when he was not in the ring.

He sat down with Clotilde at the same round table with D'Arcy and Tom Merry and Blake, and D'Arcy took tea again for the sake of sociability.

"We were having a stroll round Wayland," said Talbot. "It's a quaint old place. There's a ruined castle outside the town, too. Clotilde and I have been over it. But I suppose you know the place well?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Yes. We often picnic there in the summer," he said. "And D'Arcy knows it best of all, as he was kidnapped once, and kept there in a dungeon."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Clotilde's eyes opened wide.

"That must have been a terrible experience!" she said.

"Yaas, it was indeed!" said D'Arcy, with feeling. "I was kept there without even a change of linen, you know, and never had a wash all the time. It was vewy wuff indeed!"

"And you didn't have much to eat, did you?" said Fatty Wynn sympathetically.

"No. But that was not the worst. I wegard it as havin' been a howwid time. I had nevah weally been so dirtay in my life as I became in that howwid dungeon, you know!"

Clotilde smiled.

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They chatted cheerily till Jack Talbot looked at his watch, and Clotilde rose. Tom Merry rose, too.

"Time for us to be getting back," said Talbot. "The show begins early."

"We're over here to see the show," said Tom Merry. "We're filling up time here—and Fatty is filling up himself, too."

"I'm nearly finished," said Fatty Wynn.

"You're quite finished!" retorted Figgins, jerking his fat chum up from the table. "Leave some of the crumbs for Lazarus."

"You're coming to the circus, you fellows?" said Talbot.

"Walk down with us, then; it isn't far from here, and you'll be early for the seats."

"Good egg!"

And, Arthur Augustus having settled one bill, and Talbot the other, the party left the teasshop, and walked down to the moor, on the edge of which the circus encampment was pitched.

CHAPTER 7.

Skimpole Encounters a Spirit of Commercialism.

IT was not yet time for the performance, but the naphtha lights were flaring, and the band had begun to roll and squeak. People were gathering round the scene, and the circus folk were busy preparing for the performance.

Clotilde, with a smile and a nod to the juniors, went to her van. The juniors went towards the entrance of the tent.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy tapped Talbot on the arm.

"I should like to see the horse, if I may," he said. "You wemembah Demon, the horse I wode when you were at St. Jim's."

Talbot nodded, with a smile.

"Yes. He is here. He takes part in the performance to-night."

"Bai Jove!"

"No one dared to ride him till that day," said Talbot. "You tamed him. The signor allowed me to take it on after that; and I ride him now. I ride him in a turn with Miss Clotilde—an act we do together."

"Lucky beggah!" said D'Arcy. "I should awfully like to be a circus widah. I think it must be a wippin' life, you know!"

Talbot laughed.

"It has its bright side," he said; "but it has its dark side, too—hard work, and short commons, pretty often; and sometimes you're up at dawn, and not to bed till after midnight. It's not all lavender."

"No, I suppose not."

"Come this way, and I'll show you Demon. You fellows coming?"

"What-ho!"

They went round behind the circus-tent, among the laager of waggons and vans. The canvas stables were there, and the sounds of many animals could be heard from within.

Jack Talbot led the way in, and the horse D'Arcy had ridden when the circus was at St. Jim's pricked up his ears and looked round. D'Arcy walked over towards him, and Demon rubbed his muzzle on the junior's sleeve.

D'Arcy patted the glossy neck.

"Good old boy!" he said. "Bai Jove, it's a wippin' horse! It's too good to belong to that chap—what's his name?—Carman or somethin'."

"Carson!" said a quiet, unpleasant voice, as Jim Carson, the "Handsome Man," came up, with a cigarette between his lips. "Thank you for the compliment."

D'Arcy looked at him, quite unmoved.

"I do not withdraw my wemark," he said. "You are not the kind of chap to own a horse. You're not fond of animals. If I evah become Pwime Ministah of this countwy, I shall bwing in a Bill forbiddin' anybody to own a horse or a dog unless it's pwoved that he's weally fond of animals and kind to them. I wegard that as bein' a vewy important thing, more important than Fwee Twade or Tawiff Weform."

The Handsome Man laughed.

"You can buy the horse if you like," he said. "Fifty guineas is the price."

"I've witten to my govannah on the subject," said Arthur Augustus regretfully. "He says that since the Budget he can't afford fifty guineas for a horse for me, which I wegard as vewy wuff."

"Awfully rough," said Tom Merry. "But even if you had the horse, I dare say there would be fuss made about your keepin' it in the study at St. Jim's."

"You ass! I should not think of keepin' it in the studay. Oh, you are wottin', you wottah! Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"



Mr. Pye inserted his fingers into the sugar-basin, and drew forth a mouse. The waitress gave a great jump, and shot the cup of tea into D'Arcy's lap. "Oh!"

"I should like to have a wun wound on the horse if you have no objection, Mr. Carson," said Arthur Augustus, patting the animal's neck.

The Handsome Man shrugged his shoulders.

"As you like."

Arthur Augustus led the horse out, and saddled him with his own hands. He mounted, and rode round the circus encampment, Demon obeying him with the docility of a lamb. The horse was very changed from the time when D'Arcy had ridden it, the week before, at St. Jim's, and the boys had seen a hair-lifting exhibition of savage buck-jumping. The circus hands still did not care to come too near him, but with D'Arcy all his temper was gone.

"Bai Jove, it's wippin'!" exclaimed D'Arcy, as he dashed up to the stable again, with his silk hat on the back of his head, and his eyeglass flying, and brought Demon to a sudden halt. "I envy you, deah boy!"

Jack Talbot laughed, and led Demon into the stables. It was very dusky there, the place lighted only by an oil lamp swinging. Talbot started as he saw that the Handsome Man was still there.

Carson looked at him with eyes that glittered strangely in the gloom, and walked out of the stable.

Talbot glanced after him curiously for a moment.

He was on extremely bad terms with the Handsome Man, who had disliked him ever since he had joined the circus. But for the last day or two Carson had been civil, and Talbot, always willing to bury the hatchet, had been quite civil, too, though his dislike of the man remained unchanged.

The look in the Handsome Man's eyes struck him as curious, but he did not give the matter much thought.

Tom Merry & Co. looked round to the circus entrance, for it was time to take their seats now. The crowd was beginning to arrive, and it looked as though the circus would be pretty well filled that evening.

Jack Blake looked round a little anxiously as the juniors entered the brightly-lighted tent. A doubt had crossed his mind that a master from St. Jim's might possibly be present, and in that case it would be risky for him to show himself.

But, though there were a good many of the boys of St. Jim's in the tent, there was no master to be seen, and Blake was relieved. There were plenty of juniors, a sprinkling of seniors, and two or three prefects, but the latter naturally were not aware that a particular junior in the School House was supposed to be detained that afternoon, and they did not glance at Blake.

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NEXT THURSDAY: "TOM MERRY'S CHRISTMAS NUMBER."

A Grand Tale of the Boys of St. Jim's. By MARTIN CLIFFORD. Price 1d.

"Bai Jove, we've got good seats again!" remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as the chums settled down in line in the front row. "I regard this as wippin'!"

"First chop!" said Blake.

"Hallo! What's that?" exclaimed Tom Merry, suddenly turning back towards the entrance. "I can hear a voice—"

"Go hon!"

"One I know, I mean, ass!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Figgins. "Skimpy!"

Skimpole's voice, raised in expostulation, could be heard at the entrance, through the canvas walls.

"I assure you, my dear sir, that you are displaying the most grasping spirit of modern commercialism in making all this absurd fuss about a paltry shilling! What is a shilling? Pray reflect—"

"Kin you pay?" demanded a rougher voice, that of the man handing out the metal discs which entitled the holder to admission.

"No; unfortunately I have no money. But I wish very much to see the circus."

"Get hout!"

"Really—"

"Houtside!"

"But I wish to see the circus, and it is perfectly absurd that the lack of a small piece of silver should make any difference."

"Get hout!"

"I decline to get out. I will not remark upon your misplaced asipate, but I must say that your address is decidedly rude. I consider—"

Tom Merry, laughing, ran back to the entrance.

"Skimpy, you ass—"

Skimpole blinked at him through his spectacles.

"Ah, is that you, Tom Merry! Perhaps you will provide the paltry coin this grasping Shylock requires before he will admit me to the show."

Tom Merry tossed over a shilling.

"There you are, fathead!"

"Really, Tom Merry—"

"Pay and come in, ass!"

And Skimpole paid and came in. He joined the chums of St. Jim's on the front seat. He sat next to D'Arcy, and confided to him his views on the spirit of brutal modern commercialism, which put a price on everything, and even refused a fellow admission to a circus unless he could produce some filthy lucre.

"Under Socialism," said Skimpole, beaming, "all the circuses will be nationalised. There will probably be a Minister for Young People, with a seat in the Cabinet. We pay our statesmen now large salaries to embroil us in wars with foreign countries. A Minister for Young Persons' Amusements would be more valuable to the country than the whole of the present Cabinet, or any Cabinet mentioned in history. I myself could make a Cabinet better—"

"Bai Jove! I didn't know you were a cabinet makah," said D'Arcy.

"You misunderstand. I was referring to the Cabinet—"

"Yaas. Can you make them?"

"You are very obtuse, D'Arcy. I mean I could make a Cabinet—"

"I suppose you have taken it up as a hobby?" said Arthur Augustus blandly.

And Skimpole gave up the attempt to explain, though he had a suspicion that the misunderstanding was intentional on D'Arcy's part, and assumed for the purpose of checking his flow of eloquence.

CHAPTER 8.

Mr. Ratcliff on the Track.

MR. RATCLIFF looked out of his study window, in the New House at St. Jim's, with a frown upon his brow.

Mr. Ratcliff was feeling very much out of humour. He had never liked the chums of Study No. 6. There had been many rubs between them; but as he was not their House-master, Mr. Ratcliff had never been able to treat them as he would have wished.

The week before he had imagined that he had D'Arcy at his mercy. But the cigars and the brandy-flask which had been turned out of D'Arcy's pockets, proved to have been turned out by a conjuring trick, and Mr. Ratcliff had had an unpleasant five minutes with the Head over that incident.

Which, naturally, made him more annoyed and spiteful than ever. He was very glad to have caught Jack Blake in a fault, and to have detained him for the afternoon; but

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the fact that Blake was detained in the School House worried him.

For if Blake chose to break bounds, it was impossible for Mr. Ratcliff to discover it without taking up his stand in the School House to watch—which was, of course, impossible.

Blake might walk across the quad openly with a crowd of other fellows round him, or he might cut off through the Head's garden, or leave St. Jim's by the tradesmen's gate; there were half a dozen ways of getting out without its becoming known to the master of the New House. And the School House-master was pretty certain not to give the slightest attention to the subject. Mr. Railton had detained Blake, and would punish him if he found that he had broken bounds, but he would never dream of watching to see if he did so.

Mr. Ratcliff glanced out into the quad. in the gathering dusk.

He was spitefully determined that Blake should not enjoy that half-holiday; yet how to make sure that the junior remained in the School House was a puzzle. As a matter of fact, Blake might already be gone out, for all he knew.

The New House-master finally left his study, put on his hat and coat, and went out into the quadrangle.

The weather was cold, and the darkness was descending, but Mr. Ratcliff paced up and down the path there, keeping one eye on the lighted windows of the School House.

"If you please, sir—"

The New House-master stopped as he was spoken to. He peered down and recognised Mellish of the Fourth, of the School House.

"Mellish! What is it?"

Mellish hesitated. He had been trying to make up his mind for some time past to enter the New House and speak to Mr. Ratcliff. But he dared not do it. Fellows there might see him going to Mr. Ratcliff's study, and it would come to the ears of Figgins & Co., and thence to Blake.

But the sight of Mr. Ratcliff pacing alone in the quadrangle relieved Mellish of his fears of detection. Still he hesitated a little.

"Well?" said Mr. Ratcliff sharply. "Do you want to speak to me?"

"Ye-es, sir!"

"Speak, then, and don't waste my time."

"It's—it's about Blake, sir," said Mellish, in a whining voice.

Mr. Ratcliff started.

"Blake?"

"Yes, sir. I—I hope you won't think I'm doing wrong in mentioning it to you, sir," said Mellish. "I am speaking from a sense of duty."

"I am quite prepared to believe that," said Mr. Ratcliff. "What do you wish to tell me? Has Blake broken bounds?"

"You won't blame me for telling you, sir?"

"Certainly not."

"And—you won't let anybody know, sir," went on Mellish. "They—they would make my life a misery if they knew I had told."

"I shall be very careful. Blake has gone out, then, in spite of prohibition?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Where is he? Have you seen him?"

"He's at the circus in Wayland, sir."

"Oh! You are sure?"

"I saw him there, sir."

"Thank you, Mellish! You are a good and dutiful lad," said Mr. Ratcliff; who would have regarded anybody as good and dutiful who had helped him to wreak his dislike upon Blake of the Fourth. "I shall look into this."

"And—you won't let them know, sir?" faltered Mellish.

"You may be assured upon that point."

"Thank you, sir."

And Mellish disappeared in the gloom, quite satisfied with his revenge upon the chums of the School House. Mr. Ratcliff walked towards the School House, and then paused and hesitated.

It was useless going to Mr. Railton. Suppose he should inform him that Blake was gone, and a search should result in finding that Blake was not gone! Mellish might be mistaken. It might even be a "jape," designed to make him look ridiculous in the School House-master's eyes.

It was not likely; but it was possible. Mr. Ratcliff felt that he must be very careful. He had made himself look ridiculous in the affair with D'Arcy; he did not wish to repeat that experience in connection with Blake.

He turned his steps towards the gates of St. Jim's.

"I will visit the circus," he murmured. "If the boy is there, I shall discover him, and catch him in the very act. Then—"

Mr. Ratcliff did not finish that sentence, but there was a very disagreeable expression upon his face, and a glint in his eyes that boded no good to the truant junior. He left the school, and walked quickly down the lane in the direction of the village. Half an hour later the train was bearing him from Rylcombe to the old town of Wayland, where Tom Merry & Co. were enjoying themselves in utter unconsciousness of the approach of Nemesis.

CHAPTER 9.

An Accident at the Circus.

"SEEMS very restless to-night, sir."

It was the groom who spoke, as Jack Talbot came to mount Demon. Miss Clotilde was sitting her black Arab, ready to ride into the ring, and Demon had just been led out for Jack Talbot.

Talbot was clad in the garb of a Wild West cowboy—fringed leggings thrust into huge boots, leather belt supporting a revolver and a knife—loose shirt and sombrero—and very handsome he looked in cowboy attire.

It was a new act that the two riders were to perform, and one that never failed since it had been started to bring rounds of applause.

Miss Clotilde was clad to represent a girl of the Texas plains, and a dozen of the circus hands were painted and feathered as Comanche Indians. Jack Talbot was the handsome cowboy who dashed to the rescue, and carried Clotilde off upon his horse, while the Indians shot arrows into the air, or banged away with blank cartridges.

It made a thrilling scene, and then, after the mock fight, Jack and Clotilde gave a splendid display of horsemanship, with the Indians taking a minor part in the display.

Clotilde could not help smiling as she looked at Jack. Few would have recognised the handsome young tiger-tamer.

For Signor Tomsonio was not taking the public into his confidence on the matter. Jungle Jack, the tiger-tamer, was one person, and Cowboy Dick, the dashing horseman, was another. And as Cowboy Dick, Talbot had his cheeks stained to a very good imitation of sunburn, wore long hair over his shoulders, and had a curling moustache fastened to his upper lip.

He looked twenty at least, and made a handsome cowboy. The lad looked at Demon as the groom led him out, ready saddled and bridled. The horse was certainly very restive.

The groom showed a considerable dread of his hoofs and teeth, and the horse was dragging at the bit as he was led out.

Talbot looked at him a little anxiously.

Demon seemed to be getting back all his old temper again, and he refused to quieten even at Jack's caressing voice and touch.

"Is anything wrong with him, Jack?" asked Clotilde.

"He seems out of sorts."

"Mind, sir—he's savage."

"That's all right. I'll take him round for a few minutes, and get him into a better temper before we go into the ring. We've ten minutes yet, Clotilde."

The girl nodded, and Jack vaulted lightly into the saddle.

Demon gave a quiver, and a sudden bound.

If Jack had not been on his guard he would have been unseated at once. But he sat fast, with an iron grip on the reins.

Demon's hoofs clattered on the ground, as he sprang to and fro in frantic efforts to unseat his rider.

Jack was more and more amazed.

The animal seemed more furious than on the occasion when he had been ridden by D'Arcy, at St. Jim's.

"What can be the matter with him?" exclaimed Clotilde anxiously. "Oh, mind—look out, Jack!"

Herr Biberach, the tiger-tamer, was coming towards them, and his unsteady steps showed that he was in his usual state of being worse for liquor. He was crossing the direct path of the furious horse. Jack dragged hard on the reins to stop Demon in time, and the horse whirled round in its own length, with a wild clatter of hoofs, and then, stumbling, fell. Jack Talbot went heavily to the earth.

Demon clattered furiously to his feet, and the groom sprang forward and caught the reins, and dragged him away in time. Talbot lay where he had fallen.

Demon, still clattering and rearing, was dragged into the stable, where his furious movements could still be heard. Clotilde, in the twinkling of an eye, was off her black Arab, and kneeling beside Talbot with a white face.

"Jack! Jack! You are hurt!"

Talbot strove to rise.

"It's—it's all right," he gasped. "I'm not hurt—only—my leg! Oh!"

Clotilde cried for help, but already the circus folk who were not busy in the ring were gathering on the scene. Samson, the Strong Man, was the first upon the spot.

"Where are you hurt, lad?" he asked quietly.

Jack sat up, leaning upon Clotilde. His face was white, but he bore the pain he was suffering with quiet calmness.

"I think the ankle's hurt."

"I'll soon see."

Samson bared the ankle—it was already swollen, and Jack winced as the Strong Man touched it with a gentle finger.

"Did that hurt?"

"Oh, yes! Never mind. Go on."

Samson felt over the ankle, while Jack set his teeth hard.

"It's a sprain," said Samson, at last. "You can't ride again to-night, Jack—not for two or three days, I should say."

"Oh!"

"Nonsense, nonsense! What?" exclaimed an excited voice, as Signor Tomsonio came bustling up. The signor was in silk-hat and fancy waistcoat, with a whip in his hand, fresh from the ring. The news of the accident had brought him out. "What?—what? Not ride to-night? Why, the cowboy turn comes off in ten minutes."

"I'm sorry, sir," said Talbot quietly. "There was something wrong with Demon."

"But—but we can't cut the turn!" exclaimed the signor aghast. "To-morrow, yes, we can paste slips over the bills announcing that it's off for the present; but we can't cut it to-night."

"I'm sorry."

"But they'll wreck the show!" shouted the signor excitedly. "I tell you you've come to see the cowboy act more than anything else. We simply can't cut it. It will mean giving their money back to the audience—if they'll take it. They're more likely to pull the tent down about our ears."

"I'll try to ride," said Jack. "I may be able to get through part of the show. I'll do my best."

"You can't," said Clotilde quickly.

"You sha'n't!" said Samson. "You're not going to have a bad leg to please anybody. You sha'n't ride to-night."

"But—"

"The public!" exclaimed the signor. "What about the public! What?"

"Blow the public!" said the Strong Man.

Clotilde laid a soft hand on the signor's arm.

"Signor, Jack is hurt."

The signor softened down at once, as he always did when Clotilde spoke to him.

"Well, of course, I'm sorry for Talbot," he said. "But I'm thinking of my show. The public have paid for that cowboy act."

"Couldn't somebody else go through with it?"

"Who else?" said the signor, with a hopeless gesture.

"We only introduced it because Talbot was such a fine rider, and Demon suited him so well. Nobody else here can ride Demon, especially if he's in a temper to-night."

Jack Talbot uttered an exclamation.

"There is someone else."

"What?" said Signor Tomsonio. "Who? You don't mean the Handsome Man? Jim Carson couldn't work that act to save his life. He's all right on the trapeze, but he can't ride as you do."

"I wasn't thinking of Carson."

"Then whom?"

"The lad at St. Jim's the other day who tamed Demon!" exclaimed Talbot excitedly. "He could do it if he chose."

The signor started.

"By George! I believe he could; but what's the good of talking. He's miles away at school."

"He's here—in front."

"Here!" exclaimed Signor Tomsonio.

"Yes, I met him in Wayland, and he's in the tent now with his friends."

The signor stroked his moustache.

"By James! It's a good idea. He can ride like—like anything, and he might lend us a hand at a time like this."

"I am sure he would if you asked him."

"Then I'll do it. Samson, you know the young gentleman. Go and look for him in front, and ask him to come back here."

"Righto, sir."

ANSWERS

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And the Strong Man hurried off.
 "I'm sorry you're like this, Jacky," said Signor Tomsonio, a little late perhaps. "I can't help thinking of the show first, you know. The public must be satisfied. What? As for the tiger turn, Herr Biberach will have to put up a show—some of you look for him, and douse his head in a pail of cold water, and see that he doesn't get anything more to drink. You'd better get into your van, Jack. Here, lend a hand and carry him in."

CHAPTER 10.

D'Arcy to the Rescue.

TOM MERRY & CO. had noticed the disappearance of Signor Tomsonio from the ring, and they guessed that it portended something amiss. But Joey Pye was keeping the people in a roar with his quips and wheezes, and they did not notice for the moment that the time had come for the cowboy act, according to the programme.

"That chap is weally a funnay beggah, and no mistake," Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remarked. "Upon the whole, I forgive him for his beastly conjuin' twicks. Weally, I wish the person who is tapping my shouldah fwom behind would leave off. It weally incommodes me considerably."

But the person continued to tap, and Arthur Augustus turned his eyeglass upon the person with indignant inquiry. It was Samson.

"Bai Jove! What do you want, deah boy?" asked D'Arcy. "The guy'nor would like to speak to you, sir."

"The signor?"

"Yes, please."

"Certainly, deah boy. Tell him to come here."

Samson grinned.

"He wants you to come behind the scenes, sir."

"Oh, I see. Vewy good. I will come with pleasure. Anythin' wrong?"

"Yes, sir. This way," said Samson.

"Perhaps I'd better come with you," said Blake thoughtfully. "I don't like to trust you out of my sight, you know."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Any objection to my coming along, Mr. Samson?"

"None in the world, sir."

"Quite sure?"

"Quite."

"Then I'll come."

And Blake accompanied D'Arcy as he made his way through the crowded seats, and out of the tent. The swell of St. Jim's was puzzled and perplexed.

"I haven't the faintest ideah what the signor can want, Blake," he remarked.

Blake chuckled.

"I can guess."

"What is it?"

"You're to go on and do a fanny turn. The part would suit you. You could appear in the ring as the Funniest Thing on Earth. You wouldn't have to make up for the part."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Seriously, I fancy there's something wrong with Demon, and they want you," said Blake. "I can't see anything else they could possibly want you for. You're not what's generally considered a useful animal, are you?"

"Weally—"

"Anyway, I'll back you up," said Blake. "You can rely on me, and I like going behind the scenes, too."

The two juniors followed the Strong Man to the canvas stables behind the tent, where in the light of a dozen lanterns they found the signor.

The stout circus-master came towards D'Arcy at once. He raised his silk-hat, and D'Arcy immediately responded by sweeping off his topper.

"Glad to see you, Master D'Arcy," said Signor Tomsonio. "You may remember riding a horse when the circus was at your school?"

"Yaas, wathah."

"I'm going to ask a big favour of you. Jack Talbot has had an accident—Demon's thrown him."

"Bai Jove! I'm sorry."

"Would you care to take his place?" said the signor. "He's in bed now, with a damaged ankle. Would you care to take his place?"

"Lai Jove! no. I should vewy much object to bein' in bed with a damaged ankle."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake. "You duffer!"

"I wufuse to be called a duffah—"

"The signor doesn't mean that. He means that he wants you to take Talbot's place in the ring."

D'Arcy's eyes sparkled

"Bai Jove! Is that what you mean, sir?"

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"That's what I mean," said the signor, with a nod.

"Will you do it?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The signor gave a sigh of relief.

"Good! And thanks."

"I should be vewy pleased to do so," said Arthur Augustus, his eyes dancing. "Bai Jove! I should enjoy it more than anythin' else. It would be wippin'."

"As for the riding," said the signor, "I know you could do it. The act is a pretty simple one, and you've seen it done—you'll have to dress in cowboy clothes, and fire off blank cartridges, and put in as much buck-jumping as you can. What?"

"I'll do my best, sir."

"Then come into Talbot's van and change into his things. No time to be lost. Pye will have to keep the audience busy till you're ready. I sha'n't forget this."

"It is a pleasure to me, my deah sir."

And Arthur Augustus and Blake followed the signor into Talbot's van. Talbot was lying on his bed, and his face was vewy pale.

He nodded to the juniors with a rather ghastly smile. They could see that he was in pain, though he bore it well. He had taken off the cowboy garb.

"The lad's going to take the job on, Jacky," said the signor.

"It's jolly good of him," said Talbot. "He'll pull it off all right."

"Not at all, deah boy. I say, I'm awfully sorry to see you like this," said D'Arcy, with real concern. "I suppose it hurts you a gweat deal?"

"Not so vewy much. You must be careful with Demon. I don't know what's the matter with him, but there is something wrong. I can't quite make out what it is. I should think it was foul play of some sort, but it doesn't seem possible."

"Bai Jove! I'll be careful."

Arthur Augustus stripped off his natty attire in Talbot's van, and donned the cowboy garb. His figure was a little slimmer and a little taller than Talbot's; but a close fit was not required. The clothes fitted him vewy well, and he looked vewy handsome in the sombrero, though it certainly looked a little odd with the eyeglass.

"You'll have to take that window-pane off," said Blake, who was helping his chum to dress. "Cowboys don't wear monacles, as a rule."

"Bai Jove! no."

"I'll mind it for you."

D'Arcy shook his head.

"Thank you, deah boy, but I nevah twust my monacle out of my own hands. I suppose there is a pocket of some sort in this shirt. Yaas, I perceive there is. I suppose I shall have to have my face stained?"

"Of course, fathead. You can't go about with a chivvy like that under a cowboy hat."

"Weally, Blake—"

"You'll find all the stuff there," said Talbot.

"Thank you, deah boy."

Signor Tomsonio returned to the ring, satisfied that D'Arcy would be effectually disguised, under Talbot's directions. The artificial sunburn changed Arthur Augustus's appearance considerably, and the moustache finished it. Then with his eyebrows darkened, he looked like anybody but the swell of St. Jim's.

He gave a little jump as he looked into the glass.

"Gweat Scott! Is that weally I?"

Talbot laughed.

"It's a change, and no mistake."

"Some blessed barges have all the luck," said Blake, with a grunt. "I wish I had the chance of going on, that's all."

Talbot glanced up.

"Can you ride?" he asked.

"Oh, heaps better than Gussy."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Well, hold on," said Blake, laughing. "To be exact, my riding isn't a patch on Gussy's; but I can ride. I've ridden over some of the steepest tracks in Yorkshire. My dear chap, I was brought up on horses."

"Then you could go on as extra Indian if you liked," said Talbot.

"My hat! The signor—"

"He would be glad. You see, we make all the show we can in this turn, and every fellow who can ride is bundled on as an Indian on some sort of a horse or other," said Talbot, with a smile. "If you can ride well, the signor would be glad to put you on instead of one of the stable hands. Some of them fall off the horses."

"Jolly good."

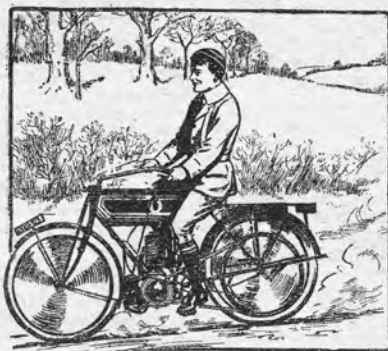
"Here's the signor. I'll tell him."

(Continued on Page 14.)

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The signor looked in with an anxious face.

"Nearly ready? Joey and Puggles are amusin' the audience, but they're beginning to stamp and yell for the cowboy act."

"Almost weady, deah sir."

Jack Talbot explained to the signor the idea of Blake going on as extra Indian, and the signor concurred instantly.

"All right, if you can ride," he said. "Here, Sammy, show Mr. Blake where to get the redskin rig, and help him on with them, will you—he's an Indian to-night."

Blake's change took less time than D'Arcy's. He dragged on the Indian leggings over his trousers, and the buckskin hunting shirt over his waistcoat. Then he donned the girdle and the moccasins. All he discarded was collar and shirt and tie; and Samson daubed his face and neck and hands with copper-hued paint, and then streaked him with warpaint of red and yellow. His hair was towled up, and feathers were stuck in it; and Blake was ready for the war-path. He grinned at his reflection in the glass. It reminded him of the time when he and his chums had played at Red Indians in Rylcombe Wood.

"Here's your horse, sir," said Samson.

"Thanks, my son."

Blake jumped upon the animal's back without assistance from the stirrup. It was a delight to the Yorkshire lad to find himself upon a horse at any time. He made the animal curvet, and nearly rode down Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as the latter emerged from Jack Talbot's van.

"Bai Jove! Take care, deah boy!" exclaimed Cowboy Dick. And Blake chuckled.

CHAPTER 11.

Foul Play.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY did not feel for the moment quite at home without his monocle; but he was looking a very handsome cowboy.

He crossed to the canvas stables for Demon, who was still making a considerable noise. The groom had tethered him, and retired to a safe distance. D'Arcy looked at the horse in the light of the stable lanterns, and noted the wildness of its eyes and the foam upon its mouth. The junior's brow contracted.

"There's something w'ong with the horse," he exclaimed.

"Looks like it," said Samson. "Mind his hoofs."

But D'Arcy did not heed the warning. He ran in close to the shying horse, and seized the bridle. Demon backed and reared and kicked.

"His saddle's hurtin' him," said D'Arcy.

"I saddled him, sir," said the groom. "It was all right when I put it on."

"There's somethin' w'ong with it."

The man looked sullen.

"I've saddled 'orses afore," he said.

"You don't know as much about horses as this young gent, Bill," said Samson. "I bet he knows what's the matter."

Arthur Augustus had the saddle off in a few moments. Then a cry of indignation escaped him.

"Bai Jove! What wascal has done this?"

He held up a lump of thorns that had been jammed between the saddle-cloth and the skin of the horse.

It was no wonder that Demon had been restive and savage, with the thorns tormenting him at every movement.

Bill the stableman gazed at it in blank astonishment.

"I swear I've never seen it afore!" he exclaimed. "It wasn't put there when I saddled the 'orse. I swear it, signor!"

Signor Tomsonio had just come in.

"Thorns—under the saddle!" exclaimed the signor, scarcely able to believe his ears and eyes. "What scoundrel—"

"I swear I never seed it afore, sir."

"There's been foul play," said Samson. "And it was done to spoil Talbot's performance to-night, too."

He did not add that he suspected the Handsome Man. But the thought was in his mind.

"Who's been in the stable since you saddled the horse, Bill?" said the signor quietly.

"Nobody that I know of, sir, except his master."

"Mr. Carson?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh!" said the signor, exchanging a quick look with Samson. "Well, never mind. I'm glad you've found out the truth, Master D'Arcy. I shall look into this. Demon seems to be quiet enough now."

"Yaas, wathah," said D'Arcy, replacing the saddle with deft hands. "Bai Jove! I should like to be within hittin' distance of the chap who played that beastly trick. I knew

there was somethin' w'ong with the horse at once. But it's all wight now."

The irritation gone, Demon seemed to become quite good-tempered again. D'Arcy led him out of the stables, and vaulted into the saddle. The Indians were gathering round the staff entrance of the tent on all sorts and conditions of horses, Jack Blake among them.

"Hallo! Talbot riding after all!" exclaimed the Handsome Man, in amazement, as D'Arcy came up upon Demon.

"No," said the signor, "that's a substitute."

"Oh, I see. Talbot hurt?"

"Only a sprain," said the signor. "If he had been badly hurt, the scoundrel who played a trick upon him would not have remained long in my circus."

The Handsome Man changed colour.

"There was a trick?" he asked, as carelessly as he could.

"Yes; a trick with the horse."

"Who did it? Do you know?"

"I've got a pretty clear idea."

And the signor passed into the tent. The Handsome Man looked curiously at D'Arcy. In the cowboy rig he was scarcely distinguishable from Talbot got up for the ring.

"So you're taking the part?" he said.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Ah, I know you now! Well, I'm glad the show won't be spoiled. And what was the matter with Demon?"

"Some beastly scoundrel had placed a thorn under his saddle," said D'Arcy, in blissful unconsciousness of the fact that it was the "beastly scoundrel" in question whom he was talking to.

The Handsome Man coloured a little.

"And you found it out?" he asked.

"Yaas, wathah."

"You are a very sharp lad," said the Handsome Man.

"Yaas, wathah! I've got my wits about me, you know," said Arthur Augustus innocently. "Bai Jove, I should like to give the scoundrel a lickin', if I knew who it was, you know. He is about the wottenest wottah I have ever heard of. What do you think, Blake, deah boy?"

"I think he's the crawlingest kind of worm I've ever heard of or read about," replied Blake, with great heartiness.

The Handsome Man walked away.

Blake looked in at the circus entrance. The people were stamping their feet, refusing to be amused any longer by Mr. Pye's wheezes, and loudly demanding the Red Indian turn.

But all was now ready.

Miss Clotilde rode into the ring, and dashed round it upon her black Arab, and the shouting and stamping died away.

After the girl rider had been once round the ring, the Red Indians were to dash in, and chase her round once more. Then, as they overtook her opposite the staff entrance, Cowboy Dick would dash in to the rescue. That was the programme, and Clotilde had already entered the arena, and was cantering round the tan.

"Ripping rider!" said Blake, looking in after her. "Tom Merry and the chaps will be wondering what has become of us."

"Yaas, wathah! They won't wecognise us."

"Not likely! My only hat!"

"What's the mattah, deah boy?"

Blake pointed.

"Look there—across the ring—just behind Tom Merry and Kangaroo."

Arthur Augustus looked.

Right across the wide circus ring, at the back of the sea of faces opposite, a familiar figure had come into sight—a late comer to the circus.

It was Mr. Ratcliff, the master of the New House.

There was no mistaking the thin, stooping, tall figure, the sour, thin face, the contracted brows, and generally unpleasant expression.

It was the New House master, and he had just entered the circus, and instead of sitting down, he was standing up and taking a survey of the assembly.

Blake's face looked comical as he frowned under the war-paint.

"Ratty, himself!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Jack Blake gave a groan.

"Fancy that bouncer taking to visiting circuses at his time of life! I never guessed that Ratty would turn up at a show of this sort."

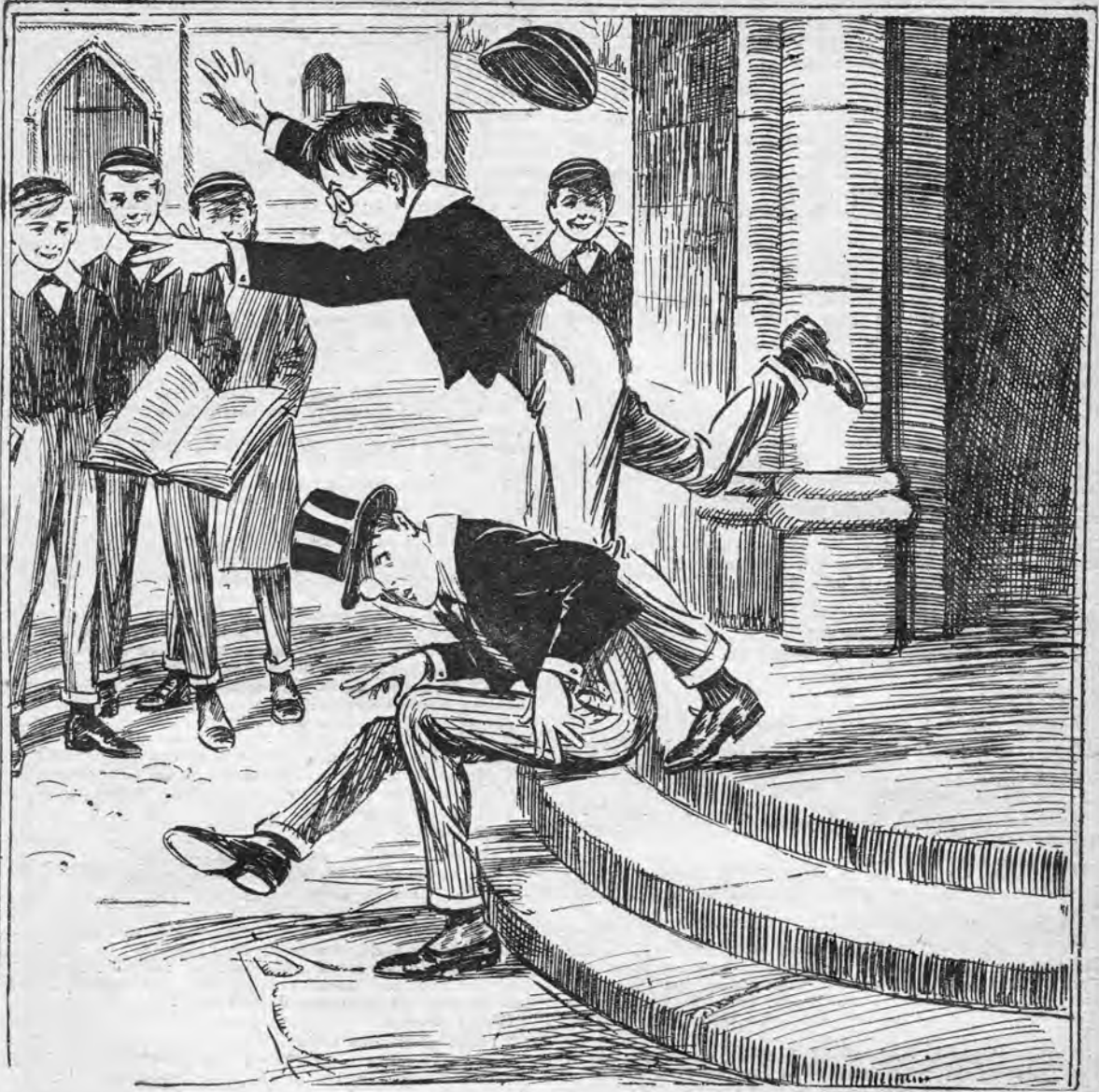
Arthur Augustus chuckled.

"He hasn't come to see the circus, Blake, deah boy."

Blake whistled as a new thought struck him.

"Do you think he has come for me?"

"Yaas, wathah! He guesses that you've cleared out, aftah all, and come to the circus, and he's come to see if you're here."



Skimpole gave a gasp as he fell over the swell of St. Jim's, and pitched forward. "Dear me!" he ejaculated. "This is most surprising! I—I must have trodden upon something!"

"My only hat! And I'm going into the ring under his very boko!" said Blake, in alarm. "I can't draw back now."

"No need to draw back, deah boy. Your own fathah wouldn't recognise you in that wig," said D'Arcy cheerfully.

"Eh? What are you talking about? I'm not wearing a wig," exclaimed Blake indignantly. "My hair is just a bit towzled up, that's all."

"I mean the general wig you are in."

"Oh, fathead, the rig! I see. I had forgotten that. I suppose he won't know me in this rig," assented Blake. "Blessed if I should know myself, if I met myself anywhere by chance looking like this. I suppose I can risk it."

"Yaas, wathah! As a mattah of fact, deah boy, you're lucky to be here in Wed Indian wig, instead of sittin' ovah there in the seats. Watty would have spotted you there at once."

"By George, yes!"

Clatter, clatter, clatter! came the hoofs of the black Arab.

Clotilde was passing the staff entrance, and it was time for the redskins to rush in. With a terrific uproar of hoof-

beats and jingled bridles and wild yells they dashed into the arena, and Clotilde galloped off, with Blake and a dozen other wild redskins in hot pursuit, while the audience burst into a cheer at the sight.

CHAPTER 12. D'Arcy's "Turn."

TOM MERRY & CO. were watching with all their eyes. They had not the faintest idea that Mr. Ratcliff was in the tent, not having glanced round, and the New House-master being directly behind them. The burst of redskins into the ring riveted the attention of the St. Jim's boys, as well as that of the whole audience.

"Jolly good!" exclaimed Figgins. "Bravo!"

"Hurrah!"

"How wonderfully Clotilde rides!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "It's splendid! When they get round once more, Talbot comes in as Cowboy Dick."

"I wonder where Gussy and Blake are all this time," said Lowther.

"Curious!"

Crack, crack, crack!
Clatter! Thud, thud!
Right into the midst of the redskins charged Cowboy Dick from the staff entrance, banging away blank cartridges from his revolver.

It was a thrilling sight.

Many of the audience were on their feet now, with gleaming eyes. Cowboy Dick, riding without touching the reins, guiding his steed with his knees only, dashed among the redskins, perfectly master of his steed, and his splendid horsemanship elicited loud cheers.

"By Jove, I never thought Talbot could ride like that," said Kangaroo.

"It's splendid!"

Bang, bang, bang!

Yell, yell, yell!

In the midst of the excitement, there was some disturbance in the seats behind Tom Merry & Co., and several voices were heard at once.

"Keep back!"

"Sit down!"

"Get out!"

"Shut up!"

"Order!"

The juniors were too interested in the scene before them to think of turning round, but Tom Merry gave a sudden jump as he heard a familiar voice behind.

"I wish to get to the front—"

"My only hat, Ratty!"

"I dessay you do, you bag o' bones," said a stout farmer disrespectfully. "We want to get to the front, only we wasn't early enough. You're late. Sit down!"

"You're in the light, old 'un! Get back!"

"Don't spoil the show!"

"Sit down there!"

"I do not wish to witness this ridiculous entertainment, only suitable for children," exclaimed Mr. Ratcliff angrily.

"I wish to speak to those boys—"

"Get back!"

"Sit down!"

"Merry! Noble! Figgins!"

Tom Merry and Kangaroo took no notice; but Figgins turned his head. Mr. Ratcliff was his House-master.

"Did you call me, sir?"

"Yes, Figgins. I—"

"Shut up!" roared a dozen voices. "Sit down! You're spoiling the show."

"Figgins, I want to know—"

"You want a thick ear," exclaimed a young man, rising from his seat and taking forcible hold of Mr. Ratcliff.

"Out you go!"

"Fellow—"

"I'll fellow you," said the young man; and he whirled Mr. Ratcliff back, and sent him crashing against the canvas wall. "Now, you come and interrupt again, and I'll squash you, you old duffer. You ought to know better than to shove among the front seats when you come late, at your age."

Figgins chuckled, and turned back to watch the show. The rescue of the Texan maiden by Cowboy Dick from the yelling redskins was very exciting, and Figgins didn't want to miss it.

Mr. Ratcliff had disappeared. He was trying to scramble up, and feeling for his hat, when a circus attendant reached down and grasped him.

"Thank you!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff, thinking that the man was trying to assist him. "I have been brutally assaulted—"

"Out you go!"

"Eh?"

"Outside! No drunken men allowed in 'ere."

"What!"

"You can go and 'ave a row outside a pub, with fellers of your own kidney," said the man roughly. "You ain't rowing in 'ere. The signor is werry particular. He don't allow no intoxicated persons inside."

"Fellow—"

"'Nuff said! Out you go!"

And Mr. Ratcliff was hurried and hustled out. He could not help going, for the man was muscular and determined, and out he went, and rolled on the grass.

He staggered to his feet, wondering whether he was on his head or his heels, and whether the world was coming to an end. Two or three circus hands stood grinning at him, and exchanging jeering remarks.

"I—I will have you prosecuted," panted Mr. Ratcliff.

"I—I am a master at a public school, and—"

"Ha, ha, ha! Go home!"

"Go and sleep it off, mister."

THE GEM LIBRARY—No. 97

"I insist upon entering that tent," said Mr. Ratcliff. "I am a schoolmaster, and some of my boys are there, and I wish to speak to them."

"Now, why don't you go 'ome quietly?"

"I—I tell you I am a master at St. Jim's—"

"Hallo, what's that?" exclaimed Samson, coming on the scene, attracted by the scuffle. "Do you belong to the school, sir?"

"Yes," spluttered Mr. Ratcliff. "I wished to speak to some of my boys in the tent, and I have been brutally assaulted."

"Sorry, sir," said Samson, who remembered having seen Mr. Ratcliff at St. Jim's, and so guessed that he was not an intoxicated disturber, though the House-master looked flustered and wild enough to excuse the mistake of the circus hands.

"I have paid for admission, too."

"He was trying to crowd to the front seats," growled one of the men.

"I merely wished to speak to my boys."

"I'm sorry, sir," said Samson, who was far from guessing Mr. Ratcliff's object in visiting the circus, of course; otherwise he would have left him to the tender mercies of the circus hands. "I suppose the people were annoyed at your interrupting the show. Will you wait till the end of the act, and then I'll take you in."

To which reasonable request Mr. Ratcliff, as he could do nothing else, gave an ungracious assent.

The act, meanwhile, was drawing to its close. It was not a long one. Cowboy Dick rescued Miss Clotilde from the redskins in the most realistic manner, emptying his revolver among the Comanches, who rolled from their saddles into the tan in splendid style.

Not the least suspicion had the chums of St. Jim's that Cowboy Dick was their elegant comrade in Talbot's guise.

If D'Arcy had spoken, they would have known him at once, but as yet he had not had occasion to utter a word.

With Miss Clotilde on his saddle bow, he dashed round the ring, firing blank cartridges, and putting the redskins to flight or levelling them with the sawdust. But one of the redskins, carried away by the excitement of the scene, refused either to fall down dead or to run away, and stood his ground, and D'Arcy shouted to him in his excitement.

"You uttah ass!"

Tom Merry gave a yell.

"Gussy!"

"Gussy!" gasped Figgins. "My only hat!"

"Oh, come off, you fathead!" replied the redskin, and Tom Merry yelled again.

"Blake!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The cowboy and the redskin were just opposite the chums when that exchange of remarks took place. The yell of laughter from the juniors recalled Blake to himself, and he put spurs to his horse and dashed away.

Bang! Bang!

"Hallo, there goes Blake!"

Blake was going down. It was not the effect of the blank cartridges, however, but of his steed stumbling in the tan. Blake shot over his head, and rolled in the sawdust. Arthur grinned in a way that made his moustache curl up round his eyes.

Miss Clotilde gave a low call, and the riderless black Arab dashed up, and the girl slipped upon his back.

Then began a display of horsemanship and buck-jumping and trick-riding; upon which the juniors of St. Jim's gazed with renewed interest, now that they were aware of the real identity of Cowboy Dick.

D'Arcy, of course, was not well up in trick-riding, but he could do almost anything with a horse, and he put up a very creditable performance, while Clotilde's trick-riding brought down thunders of applause.

When it was over, and they had retired, they had to return and take a call three or four times before the audience would finally allow them to go.

Signor Tomsonio grasped D'Arcy's hand as he rode out for the last time.

"It's ripping!" he exclaimed. "You've saved the situation, my boy. Splendid! Look here, will you give another turn later? I've got to cut the tiger act, as Talbot can't go on, but the audience will take it all right if you and Clotilde do another turn?"

"With pleasuah, deah boy!"

"Thanks, again!"

"Not at all."

And D'Arcy jumped off Demon, well satisfied with himself and his performance, and with the fun he was having.



This illustration depicts an exciting scene in the grand long complete school tale of Harry Wharton & Co., by Frank Richards, in "The Magnet" Library, now on sale, price One Halfpenny.

CHAPTER 13.

Looking for Blake.

"**D**ID you see Ratty?" Figgins murmured softly, as Cowboy Dick and Clotilde finally left the ring. Tom Merry nodded.

"Yes, rather! What is he here for? I didn't think he was fond of circuses."

"Blake, of course!"

"What-ho!" remarked Kangaroo. "He's scented it, somehow, that Blake's here, and he's come after him. What rotten luck!"

Tom Merry's brows contracted.

"It's curious he should come so far, on a mere spec," he remarked slowly. "Looks to me as if someone had been sneaking."

"By George! I should like to know whom!"

"Lucky Blake's cut out of sight for the moment," said Manners; "but if Ratty is on the track, he'll nose out what's going on, and there will be a row. What Gussy's doing is all right, but they mayn't think it all right at St. Jim's."

"Possibly not."

"If Ratty gets on to it," said Kangaroo "he'll call it masquerading in absurd attire in a low show, and bringing disgrace on the school. You know what a sweet, lovable way he has of putting things."

"Yes, the worm!"

"We shall have to keep it dark if we can. If he asks after Blake, we don't know anything; we'll understudy Brer Oyster, and keep our mouths shut."

"Good! Look out! Here he is again!"

Mr. Ratcliff was coming in, with Samson. There was nothing going on for the moment, except some tumbling by Puggles to fill up time before the next turn, and the audience allowed Mr. Ratcliff to approach undisturbed, though some far from favourable glances were cast upon him.

"Figgins," said Mr. Ratcliff, tapping the New House junior on the shoulder.

Figgins looked round.

"Yes, sir."

"Is Blake here?"

"Blake, sir?"

"Yes, Blake—Blake, of the Fourth Form. Is he here with you?"

NEXT THURSDAY: "TOM MERRY'S CHRISTMAS NUMBER."

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Figgins looked up and down the row of faces.
 "No, sir; he is not here."
 "I do not mean is he in your immediate neighbourhood," Figgins said Mr. Ratcliff sourly. "I mean is he at the circus with you?"

Figgins did not appear to hear the question.
 "Figgins!"
 "Yes, sir."
 "Is Blake at the circus with you? Did he come with you? Have you seen him here?"

Figgins set his lips hard.
 "Do you refuse to answer me, Figgins?"
 "Is it right to ask me to sneak, sir?"
 "Figgins!"
 "Yes, sir."
 "Will you answer my questions?"
 "I have nothing to say, sir."
 "Which means that you refuse?" said Mr. Ratcliff fairly; and he looked as if he were very near repeating the performance that had taken place in his study that day.

Figgins was silent.
 "Very well, sir, I shall know how to punish your disrespect," said Mr. Ratcliff. "I shall ascertain for myself if Blake is here."

"Very well, sir."
 And Mr. Ratcliff retired, baffled. Samson, the Strong Man, was looking at him grimly now. Samson knew that Blake was a Red Indian in the late performance, and he understood that the master was looking for him with far from friendly motives. It might be rough on Blake if he were discovered.

Mr. Ratcliff turned to Samson as the curtain dropped behind him at the entrance.

"I believe," he remarked—"I believe that, while this circus was at the school, Blake—a junior named Blake—became friendly with some of the circus performers."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Samson shortly.
 "I believe some of them visited him in his study."
 "Perhaps."
 "Do you know the boy by sight, my man?"
 "Yes."

"Have you seen him here?"
 Samson stared at Mr. Ratcliff, and did not answer the question. There was very much of contempt in his look, and Mr. Ratcliff coloured.

"It is an important matter," he explained. "The boy has left school in spite of being detained by his House-master. He has broken bounds, and I am here to take him back to the school."

"That's not my business," said Samson.
 "But it is mine. I think it extremely probable that, Blake having made friends with the circus performers, he is behind the scenes."

"Oh!"
 "Can you tell me whether that is the case?"
 "I can't tell you anything," said the Strong Man, walking away, and turning a deaf ear to the further remarks of the New House-master.

Mr. Ratcliff breathed hard through his nose.
 "I think I am on the right track," he murmured. "If Blake were not here, the man would say he had not seen him. I cannot discover him in the audience, so he must be behind the scenes. I notice that D'Arcy is not with the others, either, and so they are probably both behind the scenes. I will ascertain."

And Mr. Ratcliff proceeded to investigate.
 He picked his way round the tent from which a fresh burst of music showed that a new turn was on. The Handsome Man was doing his acrobat act, which was only second in popularity to the cowboy and Indian turn.

The night had set in very dark, and Mr. Ratcliff found some difficulty in getting round to the back. The flare of the naphtha lights did not help matters much, for except just where their light fell, they only made the darkness more intense.

"Oh!" gasped the New House-master suddenly.
 He caught his foot in a rope and stumbled, and fell headlong.

He threw out his arms wildly to save himself, as he rolled upon the outstretched edge of the thick canvas of the circus tent.

The shock of the sudden fall rendered him breathless, and he rolled on the ground gasping. A lantern gleamed into his dazzled eyes.

"Out of that!"
 The lantern was held by a rough-looking man. He blazed the light upon Mr. Ratcliff's face, and raised his boot threateningly.

"Get out of it!"
 "What! What! I—"
 "Out of it, you swindler—trying to get a sight of the show"

without paying!" said the stableman, in disgust. "Man of your age, too!"

Mr. Ratcliff turned crimson.
 "You—you insulting blackguard—" he spluttered.
 "Hey?"
 "Do you imagine that I want to see your wretched show? I fell—"

"Likely story!" sneered the man, seizing Mr. Ratcliff with his disengaged hand, and jerking him to his feet.
 "Very likely story! I've a good mind to call a policeman and give you in charge."

"What! What!"
 "Get out of it, or I will!"
 "I am a school-master—"

"I don't keer who you are. If you was the Tsar of Rooshia you couldn't get a sight of the show without paying!" retorted the stableman.

Mr. Ratcliff trembled with rage. To be accused of attempting to peep under the edge of the canvas to see the circus without paying for admission—it was really too bad.

"You low ruffian—" he spluttered.
 "Nuff of that!" said the man, giving him a shove that sent him staggering. "Get out! By gosh, I'll 'elp you off with my boot if you don't go!"

"I came here to find a boy—"
 "Get out!"
 "I demand to see the proprietor of this circus!"

"Haw, haw!"
 "A boy belonging to my school is here, hiding away, and I demand to see him!" said Mr. Ratcliff heatedly.

Bill, the stableman, started.

He guessed now that he had done Mr. Ratcliff injustice in one way; but he was less inclined than ever to let him be near the circus.

"Get out!" he said. "You can tell that to the marines! Now, are you going, or shall I boot you?"

And he lifted his big boot with so determined and business-like an air that Mr. Ratcliff thought he had better go.

He stumbled away into the darkness, and Bill, the stableman, walked off chuckling. But Mr. Ratcliff did not go far. He was not beaten yet.

CHAPTER 14.

Mr. Ratcliff Investigates.

SIGNOR TOMSONIO came out of the staff entrance. The Handsome Man was bringing down the house with his trapeze performance, but the signor was somewhat anxious about the next turn.

The tigers were a popular turn, and it was impossible for Jungle Jack to go through the usual performance. Jack was still lying in his caravan, and, though not now in much pain, it was impossible for him to use his ankle. The signor had determined to cut the tiger turn as short as possible, and fill up the time with an extra turn of the cowboy performance. And for what the tigers were to contribute to the bill he had to look to Herr Biberach, the German tiger-tamer. If the Herr were under the influence of liquor, however, as he usually was, there would be trouble.

Signor Tomsonio had directed his men to find the fat German, and douse him with cold water, and watch that he did not get anything to drink; but since the accident to Talbot the German had disappeared. It was easily surmised that he was sleeping off the effect of his late potations in some corner, but exactly where they could not discover. And the signor, hearing that he had not been found, was anxious.

"Found that dummy yet?" was his question, as he came out.

"No, sir!" said Bill, the stableman. "He's out of sight somewhere, sir. But we'll soon rout him out. I've found somebody else, sir!"

"Eh—what? Who?"
 "A skinny gentleman, sir. Says he's come from the school—and he's a master; and is looking for a boy here."

"Phew!"
 Jack Blake, still in his Indian garb, was chatting with D'Arcy close at hand, D'Arcy still being Cowboy Dick.

They both turned round as Bill spoke.
 "It's Watty!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

Jack Blake gave a grunt.
 "Yes. He's coming round for me, as he didn't find me in the audience. The inquisitive beast—can't be satisfied."

"Yaas, I wegard it as extremely bad form of Watty to push into the affair likè this. It shows an inquisitive mind." Signor Tomsonio frowned a little.

"Why is your master looking for you?" he asked.
 "He's not looking for me, deah boy. He's not my master. Nor Blake's either, for that mattah. But Blake was detained in the School House this aftahnoon, you see,

and I advised him to cut and run, as we wanted to come to the circus. Mr. Wattlefish has come afoam him to see if he's here. You see, it's no biznay of his weally, but he's an inquisitive sort of a beast."

"I see."

"Blake was detained by Mr. Wattlefish, and it is Mr. Wattlefish's biznay. But Watty is always lookin' for trouble. He's no gentleman."

"And if he finds Blake here—"

"I am afraid that Blake will get a wiggin from his own House-master if Watty reports him. It's wathah wotten, you know. Watty ought to mind his own biznay."

"He says he's going to see you, sir," said Bill.

"See me?" said Signor Tomsonio. "Well, he won't get much change out of me. After all, the man's not likely to recognise you boys in that disguise, so long as you don't speak."

"Ah! Is that Signor Tomsonio?" said an unpleasant voice, as Mr. Ratcliff came into the light. "You are the proprietor of this circus?"

"What? I'm the proprietor of Tomsonio's World-Famous, certainly!" said the signor. "What?"

"I wished to see you—"

"Well, here I am!"

Blake and D'Arcy stood still and silent. Mr. Ratcliff saw them both quite plainly; but he never dreamed that the Red Indian and the cowboy were two of the juniors of St. Jim's, and one of them the very junior he was seeking.

"I am sorry to take up your time," said Mr. Ratcliff.

"It is rather an important matter, however. I—"

The signor shook his head.

"Sorry," he said, "but it's no good going into it. It's no good!"

"I beg your pardon—"

"Granted! But it's no good wasting breath," said the signor kindly. "Sword-swallowing's simply a drug in the market."

"What?"

"I dare say you can give a good show; but, bless you, my man Puggles can do all the sword-swallowing that's wanted—and that's not much. Sorry! If you could do something original in the ventriloquist line, now—"

"You—you hardly understand me!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff.

"I—I am a school-master—"

"Eh?" exclaimed Signor Tomsonio, with an air of great astonishment. "Ain't you Tweedy, the sword-swallower, looking for a job?"

Mr. Ratcliff nearly choked.

The two juniors nearly choked, too; but it was from merriment.

Mr. Ratcliff's indignation at being mistaken for a sword-swallowing artist rendered him speechless for some moments. He found his voice at last.

"Sir," he gasped, "you are insulting!"

"What's your line, then?" said the signor. "Tumbling?"

"I am a master at St. Jim's!"

"Oh! My mistake! Glad to see you, sir! Have a cigar?"

"I—I do not smoke."

"Come and have a pick-me-up, then?" said the signor. "We've got a bar here, and I can recommend the whisky—real Scotch!"

"Sir!"

"Bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy, in ecstasies.

Mr. Ratcliff started, and looked round. He had heard D'Arcy's voice, and knew it at once; but he could not see D'Arcy.

"Well, I'm sorry you won't be sociable," said the signor.

"What can I do for you?"

"I heard D'Arcy speak just now—"

"What? Who?"

"A boy belonging to my school. Are there any of my boys here?"

"Your—er—boys?"

"Yes! I am looking particularly for a boy named Blake, of the Fourth Form, who has broken bounds. I have reason to believe that he is here somewhere."

"Blake?" said the signor thoughtfully. "Blake? Did you say Blake?"

"Yes, sir!"

"How do you spell it?"

"B-l-a-k-e."

"Ah, yes, I've heard that name before!" said the signor. "Name of a carpenter I knew at Eastbourne. Ever been at Eastbourne, sir?"

"No, and—"

"Fine place! Good skating-rink—"

"I am speaking about Blake—"

"Ah, yes, Blake, of course! Perhaps you don't care for the seaside much? Now, there's Scarborough—"

"Is Blake here?"

"Oh, no! He had a regular job in Eastbourne, and—"

"I am not referring to any person in Eastbourne!" said Mr. Ratcliff wrathfully. "I am referring to the boy Blake, belonging to my school."

"Oh, I see! My mistake!"

"Is he here?"

The signor looked round.

"Can you see a boy named Blake, belonging to this gentleman's school, Bill?" he demanded.

"No, sir!" said Bill, the stableman, turning his back upon the juniors. "I can't see anybody of the sort here, sir!"

"I expected prevarication!" said Mr. Ratcliff, who was too exasperated to be polite. "I fully expected it, sir! I shall not leave without Blake!"

"My dear sir—"

"I insist upon your telling me whether that boy has been here—"

"Here he is, signor!"

It was an exclamation from Samson, the Strong Man.

Mr. Ratcliff turned quickly towards him, imagining that the words referred to the missing junior.

But it was Herr Biberach whom the Strong Man was bringing forward. The stout German was very red and flustered, and there were particles of hay sticking all over him, as if he had been roused out of sleep in some corner of the stables.

He was expostulating loudly as he came along, and resisting a little; but he was as a child in the hands of the Strong Man.

"I tink tat I goes to sleep. Ain't it?" he exclaimed.

"I tinks tat I does no more for tat signor, who have giff me te order of te sack!"

"I've a jolly good mind to give you a thick ear, too!" said the signor. "You've got to go on with the tigers, next turn. Taibot is hurt, through your sticking your boozey carcase in the way of his horse here."

"I tinks tat I goes to sleep."

"Douse him with cold water, Bill!"

"Yes, sir!" grinned Bill.

He caught up a stable pail that was half full of water, and Samson let the Herr go. The cold water splashed into the fat red face of the German, and he staggered back, with a wild howl.

"Ach! Yah! I am trown!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The German, half sobered, knuckled the water out of his eyes, and glared round furiously in search of his assailant. Bill had upended the pail, and was sitting on it, gasping with laughter. Mr. Ratcliff was standing nearest to the Herr, and the German picked upon him as the guilty party. He pranced up to the New House-master.

"Tat you vas a peast!" he roared. "I tinks I teaches you to trow te vattair ofer me, after. Ain't it? Take tat!"

"Oh!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff.

And he took it—on his nose, and sat down with a bump.

CHAPTER 15.

Bad Luck for Ratty.

HERR BIBERACH danced round the fallen master like an exuberant elephant. Mr. Ratcliff, dazed, and considerably hurt by the thump on his nose, sat on the ground, staring at him stupidly.

A yell of laughter went up on all sides. The Herr's mistake seemed funny enough to all—except Horace Ratcliff.

"Tat you gets up!" roared Herr Biberach. "Tat you puts up te fist, Ain't it? Yah! I tinks I giffs you te licking. Ain't it? Ach!"

"Dear me!"

"Yah! Coward! Tat you gets up, and I knocks you town again! Yah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ruffian!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff. "I—I will have you arrested—"

"Tat you gets up!" roared the Herr, as he danced round Mr. Ratcliff, brandishing his fists. "Tat you rises. Ain't it? Pefore—"

"Ruffian!"

"Yah! I tinks I licks you! Up you gets! Ain't it?"

"Oh, my only hat!" murmured Blake, staggering with merriment. "What a night for Ratty! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha! I wegard it as extremely funny!"

"Ratty is having a night out, and no mistake. He will be sorry presently that he came to look for me and see me home."

"Ha, ha! I should not be surprised."

"Tat you gets up!" shrieked Herr Biberach.

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"I—I decline to get up," gasped Mr. Ratcliff. "I call upon you all for protection against this—this intoxicated ruffian."

"Ring off, Bibby."

"I tinks I licks him—ain't it?"

"Nuff's as good as a feast," said Samson, seizing the fat German by the shoulder. "You've got to get ready for the tiger turn, you duffer!"

"I tinks tat I licks him mit to fist—ain't it?"

"You've licked him already; that's all right."

"I tinks I goes and has a drink."

Samson chuckled.

"I think you won't, Bibby. You'll come with me."

Mr. Ratcliff staggered to his feet as Samson drew the Herr forcibly away from the spot. The New House-master's nose was red and swollen.

"I have been brutally assaulted," he said gaspingly. "I—Signor Tomsonio—"

But the signor was gone. He had had enough of Mr. Ratcliff, and he had re-entered the tent to escape further questioning by the gentleman from St. Jim's.

"I demand to be shown the boy of whom I have come in search!" exclaimed Mr. Ratcliff, almost foaming with rage. Samson shrugged his shoulders, and walked away. Bill, the stableman, whistled and went into the stables.

Mr. Ratcliff fixed his eyes upon the Indian and the cowboy.

"Can you give me any information?" he asked, little dreaming whom he was addressing. "I should be willing to recompense you for any information you could give me as to the whereabouts of this boy Blake."

He fumbled in his pocket, and produced a shilling. He held it up so that the naphtha light glimmered on the silver.

"I will give you this if you tell me where Blake is."

The Indian and the cowboy shook their heads.

"I shall not leave this place till I have discovered him," said Mr. Ratcliff. "Do you know the boy by sight?"

Blake was nearly exploding. He was pretty well acquainted with his own features; but he did not intend to confide that fact to Mr. Ratcliff.

"Why do you not speak?" demanded Mr. Ratcliff angrily. "I suppose you can speak English?"

Jack Blake gurgled.

"Answer me at once!"

Another gurgle.

Mr. Ratcliff gave them a furious glance, and turned away.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. The New House-master whirled round in a flash. He had heard the words.

"D'Arcy!" he cried.

Arthur Augustus, thinking that he was discovered, was about to give the show away completely by speaking, when Blake clapped a hand over his mouth. His voice died away in a gurgle.

"Gr-r-r-r!"

Mr. Ratcliff looked round him in amazement. He had distinctly heard D'Arcy's voice; but he did not see D'Arcy.

"The boys are hidden here, I know that!" he exclaimed angrily. "That is the second time I have heard D'Arcy speak. The voice, I think, came from this van."

And Mr. Ratcliff stared scrutinisingly at the van occupied by Herr Biberach, at the present moment empty.

He ascended the steps at the rear, and tapped at the door. The Indian and the cowboy watched him with blissful smiles.

Tap! Tap! Tap!

There was no reply from within the van. Mr. Ratcliff put his mouth close to the door and called out:

"I know you are in there, Blake! You may as well come out."

"Bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy softly.

There was no reply from within the van. Mr. Ratcliff tried the door, and it came open in his grasp. The interior of the van was dark, but the New House-master stepped into it and lighted a match. It did not occur to him in his excitement that he was trespassing into a private residence.

Blake exchanged a look with D'Arcy, and stole quietly up behind the van, and suddenly slammed the door to.

Mr. Ratcliff gave a jump.

He turned quickly to the door of the van, and the match burnt his fingers as he did so, and he gave a yell. He blundered at the door in the dark, and bumped his head on it, and his elbow on a shelf, bringing down a heap of crockery with a crash and a clatter to the floor.

Then he hurled himself upon the door to open it. But the door was fast. Jack Blake had jammed a big chip of wood under it from the outside, and as it opened outwards, it was immovable from within.

Mr. Ratcliff hammered on the door furiously.

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Blake retreated, chuckling.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated D'Arcy. "I vegard that as wathah wippin'. Watty has caught himself in a twap—like a wat in a twap! Ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the Indian and the cowboy strolled away.

Mr. Ratcliff, almost in a frenzy, hammered savagely on the door from inside. He knew that a trick was being played upon him, and he was beside himself.

"Ach! Tere is somevun in my van!" exclaimed Herr Biberach, in surprise.

The Herr was nearly sober now, the ministrations of Samson—and showers of cold water—having brought him round. He was greatly surprised, as he came up to his van to change into his professional garb, to hear someone hammering away at the door from inside.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

"Ach! Tat is fery strange."

Thump! Thump!

Herr Biberach ascended the step behind, and observing the peg planted under the door, he jerked it out, so that the door would open. It happened quite unfortunately that Mr. Ratcliff delivered a tremendous thump inside at the same moment.

The door flew open, and swept the fat German backwards. He gave a tremendous yell as he rolled on the ground, with very nearly all the breath knocked out of his plump body.

"Ach! Mein Gott! Yaroooh!"

Mr. Ratcliff looked out of the van in astonishment and alarm.

"I am really very sorry—" he began.

Herr Biberach staggered to his feet.

"Ach! I tinks I makes you sorrier!" he roared. "I tinks I smashes you."

"I—I beg your—"

"Come down out of tat!" roared the Herr, rushing at the House-master and seizing him, and dragging him out of the van.

"Oh! Help, help!"

"Ach! Peast! Pounder!"

"Help!"

They rolled together on the ground, and Blake and D'Arcy were near doing the same, from helpless merriment.

"Oh, dear!" gasped Blake. "What a night for Ratty! But let's go and yank that fat Deutcher off, or he'll kill him."

"Ha, ha! Yaas, wathah!"

The Red Indian and the cowboy laid hands upon the German, and yanked him off. Mr. Ratcliff jumped up.

Without stopping for a word of thanks, he dashed off as fast as his long, thin legs could carry him.

Blake and D'Arcy released the Herr, who was shouting and struggling, and scuttled off before the excited German could go for them in turn.

Herr Biberach, growling and grumbling, went into his van, and growled and grumbled afresh as he trod on the broken crockery.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Blake. "This is better than the circus!"

And Arthur Augustus chuckled and replied with emphasis:

"Yaas, wathah!"

CHAPTER 16.

After the Show.

TOM MERRY & CO. wondered a little what had become of Mr. Ratcliff; but they did not give him much thought. They had little fear that he would penetrate Blake's disguise, and he was letting them alone, so there was nothing to worry about. They enjoyed the show, and dismissed him from their minds.

The Handsome Man's turn came to an end, amid bursts of cheering.

The juniors did not like the Handsome Man, from what they had seen of him behind the scenes, but they admitted that the performance was a ripping one, and the acrobat's nerve on the high trapeze was certainly marvellous.

And they joined in the cheering and the clapping with hearty goodwill.

The Handsome Man retired, and then came the turn of the tigers. The big cage was rolled into the arena, with Herr Biberach rolling along with it.

Signor Tomsonio announced that owing to an unfortunate accident, Jungle Jack could not appear, but that his place would be taken in an extra turn by Cowboy Dick; and the audience gave a cheer of sympathy and approval.

Herr Biberach went through the performance with the tigers, watched with very keen anxiety by the signor.

It was impossible to omit the tiger turn altogether, as

the signor would gladly have done so; but he was far from relying upon Herr Biberach.

He had cut the turn as short as possible, and done his best to get the German into a proper state for it; but he still had his doubts.

However, all went off without mishap.

Julius and Julia were in a good temper, and the Herr managed pretty well, though the turn was nothing like that Jungle Jack was accustomed to give.

The signor breathed a deep sigh of relief when the tigers' cage was wheeled off, and the Herr disappeared.

"That's over, Joey," he remarked, "and I'm glad of it. Since Herr Bibby has taken to the bottle so much, I don't like to see him with the tigers. He wasn't so bad to-night after all, though."

Joey Pye nodded.

"Not so bad, but once is enough," he remarked. "By gum, the audience have taken it very well, and they've even given him hands. They wouldn't part with Jungle Jack so easily but for Cowboy Dick! Ha, ha!"

The signor grinned.

"Yes; Jack is growing as popular in both characters. And Master D'Arcy takes his place wonderfully well in the cowboy act."

"What-ho!" agreed Mr. Pye heartily.

A bareback turn came next, and then some conjuring by the original Mr. Pye, and then it was time for the extra turn by the cowboy and Indians and Miss Clotilde.

While Joey Pye was producing yards and yards of ribbons from his ears, and cakes and cigars from his eyelashes, the Indians were gathering at the staff entrance ready for the gallop in the ring.

Blake was among them, in high spirits. Nothing had been seen of Mr. Ratcliff since his row with the Herr, and Blake hoped that he was gone.

But D'Arcy shook his head.

"Not much, deah boy!" he remarked, as he patted Demon. "Watty won't give in till he's found you, or till he gets his neck broken. It would have made him look an awful ass to go back to St. Jim's now without you."

"Well, he seems to have cleared off."

"He will come back, deah boy."

Blake chuckled.

"Then I hope he will meet the Deutcher again, that's all."

"Yaas, wathah! Ha, ha, ha!"

And then came the cue for entering the ring, and the redskins dashed in with a wild yell, Blake yelling as loudly as any.

Tom Merry & Co. looked on eagerly. They knew now that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was the cowboy, and Blake an Indian—but which Indian they could not tell, so exactly was he like the others in his savage disguise.

"Well, Ratty won't know him, when we don't know him ourselves," said Kerr. "Blessed if I can tell one from another."

"Only if Ratty hangs round after the show, he may find Blake changing," said Tom Merry. "I don't know whether Blake's seen him. We shall have to get round before the end and warn him."

"Good! We'll miss the last turn, then," remarked Figgins.

"That's not a bad idea," said Fatty Wynn thoughtfully, "I'm beginning to get hungry."

"Oh, rats!"

"I get jolly hungry at this time of the year," said Fatty Wynn. "I suppose it's the weather. I've got a healthy appetite."

"Ha, ha! You needn't tell us that."

"Well, it's no good going hungry in this cold weather. It's bad for the system. I always believe in laying a solid foundation. I was careful to lay in something for supper before we left St. Jim's. I'm glad of it now."

Bang, bang, bang!

The cowboy and the Red Indians were going it merrily enough.

The turn, although D'Arcy was quite new to it, went off very well, and the audience were quite satisfied, as they showed by their loud cheers.

As soon as it ended, and the riders were gone from the ring, Tom Merry & Co. vacated their seats.

There was an elephant turn to come now, before the finish, and they were anxious to get round and speak to Blake before Mr. Ratcliff could collar him.

They left the tent quietly, only Gore and Skimpole remaining to see the finish.

The juniors picked their way through the darkness with better luck than Mr. Ratcliff. They came round to the staff exit from the big tent, to find the Indians mostly there, and among them a redskin whose voice was strangely familiar.

"Better get this rig off now, Gussy."

"Yaas, wathah!" replied Cowboy Dick.

Tom Merry burst into a laugh.

"Hallo, deah boys! Here's the fellows, Blake."

"You young bounders!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "We knew you in the ring, or we shouldn't have known what had become of you."

"Yaas? It's been awf'ly good fun, deah boys."

"What-ho!" said Blake emphatically.

"Yes, you lucky bargees," said Monty Lowther. "I jolly well wish I had had the chance. I suppose you ride better than I do, Gussy. Now, if it had been a question of good looks—"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Come to biznay," said Tom Merry. "Ratty's here, on the prowl. Have you seen him?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"You bet!" said Blake, laughing. "He's been having a regular beano here—fighting with Herr Bibby, and falling foul of everybody. He hasn't found me. He asked me some questions, but I didn't answer."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I managed to keep Gussy quiet, too, so that his beautiful accent wouldn't give us away, and I kept him from talking for nearly a minute; so, you see, that the chap who said that the age of miracles was past was quite wrong."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"We've got to get off now," said Blake. "We shall have to change and clean the grease-paint off, and the trouble is that Ratty is pretty certain to be hanging about for us. He's bound to be on the look-out, even if he doesn't come back."

"Houp-la!"

Joey Pye came out of the tent in a succession of hand-springs, and right-ended in the midst of the juniors with a cheerful chuckle.

"All serene!" he exclaimed. "I suppose you young gentlemen are staying to supper?"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"We should like to," he said, "but we've got to get in for calling-over, and there's a master after Blake, too, for breaking bounds. The trouble is that he's watching for him, and will most likely spot him as he leaves the circus."

Joey Pye rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"It's wathah an awkward posish for Blake," remarked D'Arcy. "Watty has been watchin' for a long time to catch one of us off his guard, you know, and he'll be on Blake's twack like a cat aftah a giddy mouse, you know."

"Ah! Merry! Figgins!"

The juniors started. It was Mr. Ratcliff's unpleasant voice.

The New House master came upon the scene, with a venomous glitter in his little eyes, and a sour expression upon his face.

The boys touched their caps respectfully.

"Merry, I am fully aware that Blake is here. I presume that you have come to take him with you. Where is he?"

CHAPTER 17.

Caught!

TOM MERRY did not speak. Mr. Ratcliff's eyes glittered, and he raised his voice a little as he went on.

"Merry, where is Blake?"

Still Tom Merry did not speak.

"This is a conspiracy," said Mr. Ratcliff, in a choking voice. "You are all in a conspiracy to protect that boy."

Blake chuckled. Mr. Ratcliff glanced at him angrily.

"I am surprised and shocked, Merry, to see you associating like this with low persons," said the House-master spitefully.

There was a general grin. The low persons Mr. Ratcliff alluded to were Blake and D'Arcy, in their circus disguises.

"And I shall report your conduct to your House-master," exclaimed Mr. Ratcliff angrily, annoyed at the want of impression by his angry words.

"Mr. Railton has not objected to us visiting the circus, sir," said Tom Merry. "He knows we have friends among the company, too."

"I am here to find Blake," said Mr. Ratcliff, changing the subject. "That he has broken bounds, I am assured."

"Have you looked for him in the School House, sir?"

"I have not. I am certain that I shall find him here."

"You know best, sir."

"You need not prevaricate, Merry. I do not expect to receive any assistance from you in maintaining discipline in the school."

"Mr. Railton may be able to manage the discipline of his own House, sir, without assistance from outside," suggested Monty Lowther, as softly as the cooing dove.

The New House-master flushed.

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"Don't be impertinent, Lowther."

"Oh, sir! Impertinent to you!"

"Silence!"

"Certainly, sir."

Joey Pye closed one eye for a moment with a comical expression that made several of the juniors burst into a laugh, and then approached Mr. Ratcliff, lifting his paper hat in an absurdly ceremonious salute.

"You want to find a boy, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, my man."

"Will you follow me, sir?"

"You know where Blake is?"

"Well, sir, if you'll follow me I'll do my best for you," said Joey Pye; and he walked away from the spot.

The House-master gave the juniors a bitter look. Then he followed the clown, utterly unconscious of the fact that he was leaving the boy he sought behind him with Tom Merry & Co.

Tom Merry was looking puzzled.

"What's the little game?" he muttered.

"Blessed if I know!" said Kangaroo. "Only Pye's going to play some jape on Ratty, that's as safe as houses."

"Yaas, wathah!"

And the juniors of St. Jim's waited for Mr. Pye to return.

Mr. Ratcliff followed the clown, nothing doubting.

Joey Pye led him into a tent, where no light burned.

Mr. Ratcliff hesitated and stumbled in the dark.

"Can you see, sir?" asked Joey Pye, with great solicitude.

"No, I cannot," snapped the House-master.

"Better take my hand, sir."

"Where are you taking me to?" asked Mr. Ratcliff snappishly, groping for Joey Pye's hand in the dense darkness.

"This way, sir."

"But—"

"Straight ahead!"

Joey Pye drew the House-master forward, and then suddenly released him and left him.

Mr. Ratcliff called out, but there was no reply. He heard a key click, and that was all.

"Where am I?" gasped Mr. Ratcliff. "Man, where are you? What does this mean?"

There was no reply.

Mr. Ratcliff groped about, and his hands came in contact with the bars of a cage. He fumbled in his pockets, and drew out a match-box.

He struck a match, and gazed round him furiously.

He was inside a cage—empty save for himself. The clown had tricked him, and locked him up in an empty cage.

The House-master dragged at the door furiously. But it was locked.

"Oh, oh!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff. "They shall pay for this. It is a plot. All of them are in it, of course. But they shall pay dearly for it."

He dragged at the cage door and shouted. But only the echo of his own voice answered him, and the cries of distant animals whom his shouts disturbed.

Joey Pye meanwhile rejoined the juniors of St. Jim's with a joyous grin upon his comical face.

"Where's Ratty?"

The question was asked by all the juniors at once.

Joey Pye chuckled.

"Do you remember a chap who came to see the circus, and was rude to Miss Clotilde?" he asked. "Chap named Gore, I think—some time ago. You know what I did with him."

"Locked him in a cage," said Tom Merry.

"Exactly."

"But—but—Ratty—"

Mr. Pye nodded coolly.

"Yes, I have! He's in the same cage I locked that chap in, only he's going to stay in it longer—till you're safe home, in fact."

"My only hat!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors looked serious. It was no light matter, locking a House-master up in a cage.

"It's all right," said Mr. Pye. "It was I that did it, not you. You didn't even know it was being done. You get those things off, and get back to the school, and we'll let the old fellow loose in an hour's time."

"An hour! Poor old Ratty!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, sooner, if you think it's safe," said Mr. Pye generously. "He's making plenty of row."

"Bai Jove! I think half an hour will be enough," said D'Arcy, "then he will have to catch a latah twain home to Wylcombe, you know."

"Yes, that's all right."

"Half an hour let it be, then," agreed Mr. Pye. "You

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go and get that paint and those things off, then. Mr. Ratcliff won't trouble you for a bit."

The juniors, chuckling, did so. Tom Merry & Co. helped Blake and D'Arcy to clean down and change into their normal attire; and the change did not take so long as it had taken to assume the disguise.

In ten minutes or so Blake and D'Arcy were looking themselves again, save for a few slight smears of paint that were hardly noticeable.

Then they were ready to depart.

Signor Tomsonio and Miss Clotilde and Joey Pye bade them good-night; the signor overflowing with thanks for the good turn Arthur D'Arcy had done him.

The swell of St. Jim's disclaimed thanks in his graceful way.

"Not at all, my dear fellow," he said. "You were in a doocid awkward posish, as a mattah of fact, and I was only too pleased to be able to help you. I'm awfully glad I was on the spot, that's all. It was a weal pleasure to me."

"Well, good-bye, and good luck!" said the signor. "If there should be any trouble about what's happened to-night, let me know, and I'll call and explain to the doctor."

"Thank you, dear boy; but it's all right, there won't be any trouble. As a mattah of fact, Blake has been saved from bein' nabbed by takin' on that wedskin turn."

"What-ho!" said Blake.

"Good-bye, signor—good-bye, Miss Clotilde!"

"Good-bye!" said the girl softly.

And D'Arcy went into Talbot's van to shake hands with him before he went. Then the juniors of St. Jim's trooped off and joined Gore and Skimpole outside the tent, and they went together to the railway-station.

In a few minutes more the train was bearing them swiftly towards Rylcombe.

They arrived there, and walked down to the school in high spirits. They had had a most enjoyable afternoon out, and even if there were consequences to be faced, that was all in the day's work, as Figgins remarked.

"But I think it will be all right," Tom Merry remarked.

"It's as dark as the inside of Gussy's silk hat, and nobody will see Blake go in. When Ratty comes back, he'll find Jacky in the School House—gated, as he ought to be. Who's to prove that Blake has been at the circus at all?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Ratty can't say that he saw him there," grinned Kerr. "He did see him, as a matter of fact, but he doesn't know it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the juniors entered the school chuckling. Blake easily dodged in across the shadowy quadrangle, and up to the Fourth Form dormitory, where he changed his clothes, in order not to have a single tell-tale sign of dust or mud about him. Then he went down to the common-room, and started a game of chess with Digby.

CHAPTER 18.

Checkmate.

MR. RATCLIFF raged in the iron cage, in the darkness of the tent, as if he had been one of the wild animals for whom it was intended. He shook the bars, and he shouted and threatened. But all was of no avail; and finally he gave it up, and waited in sullen wrath for his release.

It came at last. A light gleamed in the tent, and a voice was heard.

"The row seemed to come from here, signor."

"Somebody in the cage, Bill, perhaps."

"Oh, no, it's locked!"

"Well, then, what—"

"I am here," said Mr. Ratcliff, in a choking voice—"I am here. I insist upon being immediately released. You shall pay for this outrage."

"My 'at!" ejaculated Bill. "There is somebody in the cage."

"Release me immediately!"

"Hold on, Bill!"

"The key's in the lock, sir," said Bill.

"Yes, but hold on!" Signor Tomsonio gazed sternly at the New House-master through the bars of the cage, the lantern gleaming upon Mr. Ratcliff's furious face. "Who are you?"

"You knew me well enough."

"My 'at!" exclaimed Bill again. "It's the feller who was trying to look in under the edge of the tent, sir, when the performance was on."

"You—you ruffian!" spluttered Mr. Ratcliff. "I was doing nothing of the kind."

"I found 'im on 'is 'ands and knees just outside the tent, sir."

"I had fallen down——"
 "A likely story."
 "Lemme see," said the signor, peering at Mr. Ratcliff with close attention; "are you the man I was speaking to some time back—you claimed to be a sword-swallower——"
 "I am a master at St. Jim's," said Mr. Ratcliff furiously.
 "Oh, yes, I remember now! You were looking for your little boy."

The House-master nearly choked.
 "I was looking for a boy belonging to my school."
 "Have you found him?" asked the signor innocently.
 "I have not, sir," shrieked Mr. Ratcliff—"I have not found him; because I have been trapped in this place in the most outrageous way, sir."

"Dear me! What are you doing in that cage?"
 "I was locked in here."
 "Is there anything missing from the tent, Bill?"
 "I don't see nothin', sir," said Bill, casting the light of the lantern round him with an air of keen scrutiny.
 "Missing!" panted Mr. Ratcliff. "Do you think I am a thief? I—I——"

"Well, men of your looks don't generally sneak into a tent for nothing," said the signor. "I think I'd better leave you locked up, as there may be something missing. One can't tell just by a look round."

"Locked up!"
 "Certainly. We'll keep him in the cage till the police come, Bill."

"Ay—ay, signor!"
 "Man!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff, "I am a master at a school."

"Then what are you doing in this tent?"
 "I was brought here by a—a clown, who pretended that he was going to show me where Blake was," panted the House-master.

The signor shook his head seriously.
 "Mighty poor yarn," he said. "You're either a thief, or you're drunk and disorderly. Still, perhaps, we might let you off, if you promise that it shall never occur again. What?"

"Man—villain—I——"
 "Let him out, Bill."

The grinning Bill unlocked the door of the cage, and Mr. Ratcliff stumbled out. He was white and stuttering with rage. Had Bill been a little less muscular in appearance, Mr. Ratcliff would probably have assaulted him there and then.

The signor gave him a stern look.
 "Now, my man," he said, in his heaviest style, "you'd better cut off. I won't have you arrested on suspicion, because I don't want any bother; but if I find you hanging round my circus again, I'll have you run in, and don't you forget it. Scoot!"

"I—I—I——"
 "Oh, scoot!"

Mr. Ratcliff almost staggered from the tent.
 He could do nothing there—and he felt that if Blake had been at the circus, he was gone now. There was nothing to do until he returned to St. Jim's, and then——

He hurried away from the circus pitch, and reached the station, and walked up and down the platform in a bitter wind for a quarter of an hour, waiting for the local train to Rylcombe.

He fumed and raged all the way to Rylcombe, fortunately having a carriage to himself; for his state of mind certainly bore out the signor's declaration that he was "drunk and disorderly."

He nursed his wrath during the walk to St. Jim's, his temper not being improved by a shower of rain that began to fall when he was half-way to the school.

He arrived at St. Jim's, and let himself in, and stalked across the quadrangle to the School House.

Straight in he went, and to Mr. Railton's study, and there he found the School House-master, who was chatting with Herr Schneider, the German-master.

Both of them stared in blank amazement at the New House-master as he went in—or, rather, burst in—without the formality of knocking. Mr. Railton rose to his feet.

"Mr. Ratcliff, is anything the matter?"

"Yes, sir," almost shouted Mr. Ratcliff; "something certainly is the matter. Blake has broken bounds, sir, and gone to Wayland."

"Indeed!"
 "He has been to the circus there, sir."

Mr. Railton looked worried. He had forgotten all about Blake and his gating, and he had not the faintest idea why Mr. Ratcliff was so excited.

"I went there to catch the boy in the very act of disobedience, sir," said Mr. Ratcliff savagely, "and I have been brutally assaulted by his low friends in the circus."

"You are sure Blake was there?"

"Quite sure, Mr. Railton."

"I mean, did you see him?"

"I did not see him."

"I cannot act in this matter without evidence," said Mr. Railton quietly. "If you prove to me, or give me your word, that Blake was there, I can act. Had you any reliable information on the point?"

"Yes, I had," snarled the New House-master. "I was told so by a boy who saw him there—a boy belonging to Blake's own Form and House."

Mr. Railton compressed his lips.

"A boy who will tell tales will tell falsehoods also, as a rule," said Mr. Railton. "I presume the boy was no friend of Blake's, either, or he would not have spoken on the matter at all. You did not see Blake yourself?"

"I have said that I did not."

"Then I do not see what can be done."

"What! The boy is probably still out of the house!" exclaimed Mr. Ratcliff.

"In that case, of course, I can act," said Mr. Railton. "Pray excuse me a few minutes, Herr Schneider, while I ascertain if Blake is in the house."

And Mr. Railton left the study, followed by the New House-master, and as they approached it, the voice of Jack Blake was heard to exclaim:

"Check!"

"Oh, rats!" said Digby. "I didn't notice your blessed knight."

Mr. Railton smiled, and looked into the room. Blake and Digby were playing chess, and Tom Merry, and Lowther, and Kangaroo, and Gore, were sitting round watching the game.

"Ahem!" said Mr. Railton. "Blake does not appear to be out of the house."

And he walked back to his own study. Mr. Ratcliff followed him.

"Do you mean to let the matter drop here, Mr. Railton?"

The School House-master looked at him steadily.

"I do not see what else I can do," he said. "If there were a tittle of evidence against Blake, I could act. I cannot take the word of a tale-bearer; and I will not force the boy to criminate himself. I am sorry you had such an unpleasant time at the circus; but surely, Mr. Ratcliff, it was not worth so long a journey simply to catch a junior in the act of breaking bounds—for so harmless a purpose as visiting a circus?"

"Mr. Railton——"

"If Blake had done as you suggest, I should punish him very lightly, under the circumstances," said the School House-master. "Besides—excuse me—the less said about your adventures at the circus the better. What these boys know they will keep quiet for their own sakes now. But if the whole story comes out, I must say that you will cut a decidedly absurd figure in the eyes of the whole school, Mr. Ratcliff."

"Oh, very well, sir!" said Mr. Ratcliff, hardly able to contain himself. "Very well, indeed."

And he stalked away towards the door. As luck would have it, he met Mellish, of the Fourth, on the School House steps. Mellish smirked to the master, expecting an agreeable nod at least, after his valuable service of the afternoon. But Mr. Ratcliff was not in an agreeable temper. Indeed, he was half-inclined to believe that after all Blake had never been to the circus, and that the cad of the Fourth had been "japing" him.

To Mellish's surprise, he received a ringing box on the ear, that sent him reeling. He staggered into the house, and Mr. Ratcliff stalked away across the quad, leaving Mellish rubbing his reddened ear in wonder and wrath.

In the junior common-room, half a dozen juniors were chuckling over a game of chess.

"Bai Jove!" remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "It's checkmate, you know!"

"Eh?" said Blake. "It's check—but——"

"I wasn't alludin' to that game, deah boy. I was alludin' to Watty."

"Ha, ha! Gussy's right!" chuckled Tom Merry. "It's checkmate for Ratty this time, and no mistake! This is where we smile!"

And they smiled!

THE END.

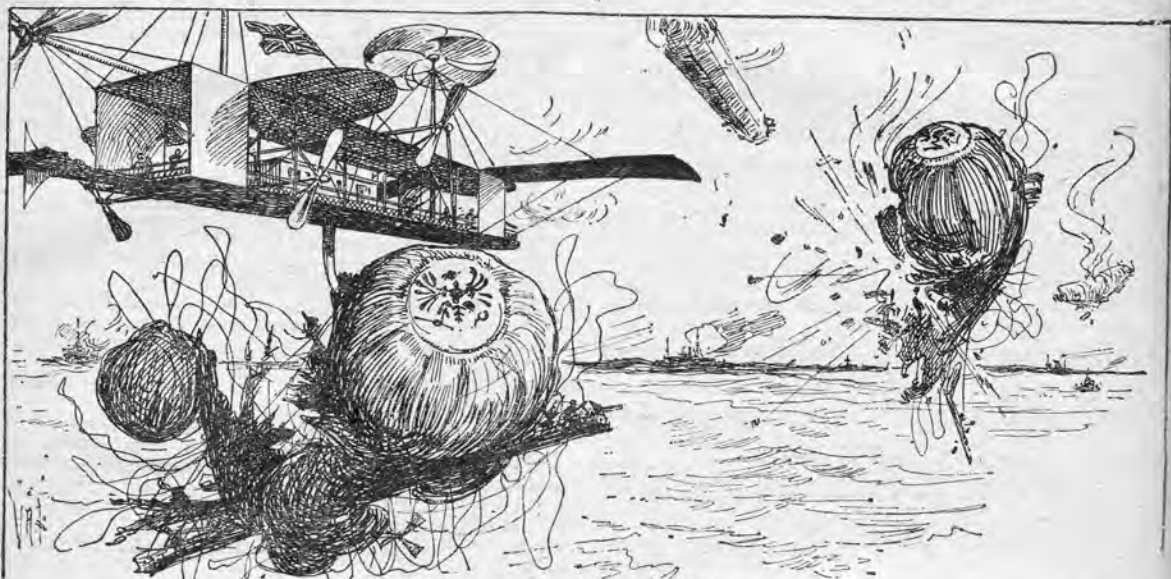
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BRITAIN'S REVENGE

THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS ARE:

AUBREY VILLIERS nicknamed Sam Slick. A lad who has performed wondrous service for his country in her time of need, during the terrible invasion by the Germans.

STEPHEN VILLIERS, his brother. He is Sam's companion in all his exploits.

After the sweeping defeat of the Germans in London, as related in "Britain at Bay," the country is astounded by two brothers—men named Carfax.

Harrington Carfax, a scientist-inventor, discovers the way to make gold, and presents to the Chancellor of the Exchequer £100,000,000.

John Carfax has invented an absolutely perfect aeroplane, and he takes Sam and Steve to Germany.

There the two young scouts accidentally discover that a plot is afoot to murder Harrington Carfax, and they persuade his brother to make all speed to warn him. This John Carfax laughingly consents to do, and the three return to England in the airship, only to find that Harrington is already, to the boys' astonishment, in possession of the details of the plot against him. However, the attempt to kill him is made, but fails, and the assassin meets an untimely end.

An hour or two later another plot is discovered, and by means of his hypnotism Carfax compels one of his servants to reveal the plans arranged for the rescue of the Kaiser. Preparations are made immediately to start off in the Condor.

(Now go on with the story.)

A Startled Night-Watchman.

"Is the Condor ready to start?" cried Carfax. "Have you got the repairs done, and the petrol stored?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Jump aboard, then, and off we go! There's a sharp journey in front of us, and some jolly queer work at the end of it. Hold a moment. Ship another searchlight before you start. We shall want two."

Carfax boarded the Condor, and inspected her swiftly. He was pleased with what he saw, though he knew Kenneth and Hugh were always to be trusted to have things in fighting order. As for Sam and Stephen, they were delighted to feel her deck-plates under their feet again. The extra gear was quickly brought, and stowed in the deck-house.

Carfax paused with his hand on the starting-lever.

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"Have you got fresh cartridges for that Maxim to replace the lot we used?"

"Yes, sir. Twenty belts of them."

"Good! Let her go!"

The Condor rose gently, slanting up towards the farthest tree-tops. It was rather a confined space for her to rise in for the one thing she could not do was to mount straight upwards. She stopped short of the trees, reversed her engines, and described another zigzag backwards over the roofs of the sheds, and then was clear. Up she soared towards the clouds on a long incline, and turning due east, forged along through the dark skies in the direction of London. Kenneth and Hugh, as soon as they had set her going, were burning for news.

"Is Harrington safe, sir?" cried Hugh.

"Perfectly. I never knew him safer," said Carfax, with a slight smile and a glance at Sam.

"Thought he would be," said Kenneth. "I didn't worry about him myself."

"Not only that, but we had news from him that's likely to keep our hands uncommonly full for the next twelve hours," added Carfax. "Give her ten more revolutions, Kenneth—she will stand it now—and you shall hear what we have to do. An attempt will be made by a German airship before morning to get the Kaiser out of the Tower and deliver him in his own country."

Kenneth and Hugh, used as they were to strange happenings and stranger jobs under their famous master, stared in amazement. Carfax, putting the matter as briefly as possible, told them what had occurred in the smoking-room at the Manor House.

"My aunt!" said Kenneth. "This is a big thing, isn't it, sir? They've got some enterprise left, these Dutchmen. It might quite well come off, too, if they handle it properly. That'll have been the Kronenfels that we saw over the Channel yesterday evening."

"Yes, the same."

"D'you think she saw us?"

"I should say not. It was nearly dark, the distance great, and we don't loom up anything like so much as these great gas-bags. It was only a glimpse we got of her. In any case, as we didn't go in chase of her, it wouldn't alter

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kipper's plans. He cannot dream that we know what he's after. What are you looking so disturbed about, Villiers?"

"Was I, sir? I'm wondering if we shall be in time, that's all," said Sam. "It's been dark as pitch for some while, and what if the Kronenfels is before us?"

"I think not. She would certainly never start overland before dark, or let herself be seen passing over Kent. She must wait till nightfall, of course, and her speed cannot be more than twenty miles an hour at the utmost. It cannot take her less than three hours, probably four, to reach London. We can do it from here in an hour."

"Besides, she's not likely to start in the early part of the night," put in Hugh. "There's too much glare over London till the shops are shut and the houses put their lights out."

"There won't be much glare to-night," said Sam. "It's as thick as wool, and the sky's masked with heavy clouds. Do you think the Kronenfels expects to do this job without being seen, sir?"

"Quite likely she wouldn't be spotted at all," returned Carfax. "Nothing could be seen against the sky a few hundred yards high on a night like this. There's very little light from that part of the City at night, too, to shine on anything overhead."

"And she won't spot us either, you think, if we're there waiting for her?"

"Ah, that's another matter! Up aloft, she might get a sight of us," said Carfax.

"Don't matter if she does," said Stephen. "We can overtake her in a brace of shakes."

"I don't want to do that; I prefer to see exactly what she intends to do, and take her in the very act," said the aeronaut. "The more completely we can overturn this plot and show it up, the less danger will there be in the future. I am going to lie in wait for the Kronenfels, and we cannot do it up aloft. We must be within sight of the spot, and yet unseen."

"Where can that be done from?" said Hugh doubtfully.

"I have my mind on the very place, and I think it will do," said Carfax. "You can ease those engines six revolutions again; they are beginning to show strain, and they must not fail us to-night."

The Condor's crew drove her onwards steadily, racing through the black night, the muffled "teuff, teuff, teuff" of the engines, mingled with the rush of the wind past her sides, being the only sounds.

The lights of Reading, dim and blurred in the haze, could be seen far below. Soon they were left behind. Woking was passed, and by-and-by the glow of London became visible ahead. Brentford and the outer suburbs presently lay beneath, and the Condor rose to a still greater height as she went on over the metropolis itself.

"We want neither friend nor foe to see us to-night," remarked Carfax. "We are nearly at our journey's end. Hugh, get me my nightglasses."

He focussed a pair of wide-lensed binoculars upon the great city beneath as the Condor, reducing speed, passed slowly over it.

"The Kronenfels' crew and what's-his-name—Von Mansfeldt—will do plenty of staring through those things to-night," said Stephen.

"They have no such glasses as these," Carfax replied, still keeping them to his eyes. "They are my own invention, and show a fifty per cent. clearer view, even on a murky night like this, than the old sort. You shall test them for yourselves when the time comes. Stop her, Kenneth. Now bring her down slowly. That will do; keep her at that."

The airship descended several hundred feet. The Thames could just be made out, like a dark-grey ribbon threading through the gloomy waste, a dimly-lit house far below. The Condor poised a few moments while Carfax reconnoitred with his glasses, and then he ordered her lower still. The boys used their field-glasses, but were not able to make out very much with them, though on clear nights they were fairly useful.

"What's that dark mass with the four things like pepper-pots sticking up at the corners, sir?" said Stephen, whose sight, with glasses or without, was the sharpest.

"The Tower," said Carfax.

"By Jove! We're there, then! I didn't know we were so far. Aren't those the masts of vessels that I can see on the other side of the river, below?"

"Yes, and behind them is the place where I want to land. I hope it's clear," replied the aeronaut. After a little more manoeuvring he satisfied himself on that hand.

"Stand by to go down," he said. "We must do it as quickly as possible, for I do not wish our arrival to be noticed if I can help it."

The Condor was never better handled than she was then. Swooping down swiftly from the height, she stopped short just clear of the masts of some vessels, and then settled quietly just beyond them, and alit.

When Sam realised that the Condor was at rest, he found she was upon a wide wharf on the south bank of the river, with a row of tall warehouses close to her on the left side, while several sailing-barges and coasting vessels were tied to the quay and hemmed her in on her right hand, more or less screening her from the river.

The only witnesses of her arrival were a startled night-watchman who was sitting on a barrel smoking a surreptitious pipe, which fell from his hand and broke as he gazed in amazement at the big aeroplane, and two or three men who poked their heads out of hatches of the moored ships alongside, and used strong language in their surprise.

The Rescue by the Kronenfels.

"Great Scott, Bill! What is it?" said a startled voice from a neighbouring schooner.

"I've got 'em!" gasped the night-watchman, leaving the barrel and backing away hastily. "I'll swear off, straight I will. I won't touch lickor for a month!"

"Here, jump down, lads, and tell those fellows not to raise a fuss," said Carfax. "We don't want a crowd round us from outside, or the show will be given away. Keep them quiet."

Sam leaped down at once, and the boys hurried round to "tip the wink," as Stephen called it, to the few spectators who were so interested in them.

"Don't be scared, daddy; you haven't got 'em," said Sam to the night-watchman. "You deserve 'em, I expect. But we're all right; we're merely an airship, in British service, and all we want you to do is to keep what you see to yourself."

"Blow me tight!" said the watchman, staring at the aeroplane. "Then you must be that there Condor!"

"That's it. And if you'll just keep it quiet and see the news doesn't go outside this quay, you'll be rendering your country a service, and doing a hand's-turn to the Germans at the same time. Tumble?"

"You stand on me, guv'nor. I'll see it goes no farther. Scotty, to think o' your airship a-comin' on to our wharf! That'll be Mr. Carfax, that we've heard so much about, standing on her, ain't it?"

"Yes, that's he. We've come to take a rest, you see," said Sam. "Sit down on the barrel again, and take things easy, daddy. I'll get you some baccy presently."

Meanwhile Stephen and the two younger aeronauts had boarded the various vessels lying at the wharf, and interviewed their crews. They were all English coasting vessels, and everybody aboard was eager to help the Condor, and to hear all about her.

"They're all right. We sha'n't have any more audience than we've got now," said Stephen, returning to the aeroplane. "They'll see some sport before the night's over, I should think, sir."

"You might ask that barge to haul a little farther forward. Her big mast and furled sprit-sail will just shield our propellers nicely from any chance of being seen from the river," said Carfax.

The bargemen shifted their vessel with the best of good will when they were told what was wanted; and when it was done the boys saw that the Condor had a very snug berth indeed, and could yet rise out of it swiftly if there was need.

The great river flowed darkly beyond, and on the far side, a little way up, the black mass of the Tower of London could be seen. All was quiet and still, save when a waterman's boat crossed the river or a barge dropped down with the tide.

"In which room does the Kaiser sleep—do you know, sir?" murmured Sam.

"Yes; I got that from Harrington before we left. In one of the upper rooms of the White Tower, facing the river."

"Aren't those windows all barred?"

"That's a difficulty that's probably been got over, if so. But nobody would dream of troubling to prevent an escape from the window. It would be an eighty-foot drop, I should think, and only into the courtyard, among the guard and sentries."

"But the Kronenfels won't be able to bring her car to the window, like the Condor could?"

"Certainly she can't. Her great gas-bag and ropes would be almost certain to foul the turrets above, and get torn. She must remain some little way above—say sixty feet. But exactly how she expects to get the captive out is what we can't tell till we see for ourselves. So it's no use guessing at it."

"She won't blow the place up, or anything like that, I suppose?" put in Stephen.

"No fear of it. That would be too risky to the Kaiser himself."

"I bet he's sittin' on pins and needles while he's waiting for her to turn up," chuckled Stephen grimly.

"And planning fresh invasions an' revenges on Great Britain."

when he's free once more," added Sam, with a laugh. "Dangerous chap to let loose, the Kaiser."

Silence fell upon the wharf, and hour by hour the crew of the aeroplane watched the Tower and the sky overhead. Carfax gave the boys some spare night-glasses of his own pattern, and they were surprised at the power of them, and the way the lenses aided the sight to pierce the darkness. Stephen found he could plainly make out the stone sills and the sashes of the windows in the Tower.

Yet, as the night wore on, there was no sign of any visitor from the skies. The lights of London gradually lessened and went out, and the slight, dull glow became fainter, as only the street lamps remained. The air was a little clearer, but the heavens were still heavily veiled with clouds, and the blackness was intense.

"Is she going to fail us?" muttered Sam.

Carfax touched him on the arm, and pointed to a house, some way up the river, which jutted out over the wharves farther than most.

"She's not far off," he said. "Look there."

Three lights, strangely white and bright, could be seen in a single window of the darkened house. They were vanishing and reappearing in a curiously slow, jerky manner.

"That's where Edelmans should have been," said Carfax ominously. "Somebody has taken his place, however, and I'll engage that they're wondering what has happened to him. They are signalling to the Kronenfels, and she is somewhere far aloft, reading those signs off. Can't you picture her skipper watching them?"

Kenneth and Hugh leaned forward over the rail, and scanned the sky intently. The boys did the same, a thrill running through them as they realised the moment was near.

"What's that?" said Stephen, pointing straight upwards above the Tower.

A vast, shadowy shape could just be made out by a sharp pair of eyes, looking rather like a gigantic, elongated egg hanging in the sky, no great way up. Only an outline could be seen. If the gaze was turned away for a moment, on looking again, it was hard to see the thing.

"The Kronenfels," said Carfax quietly.

The night-glasses were turned on her at once, and with their aid the great airship could be made out more plainly. The gas-bag was very long and bulky, and a good-sized torpedo-shaped car was seen some distance below it, with huge propellers and fan-screws. It looked as though the car were separate entirely, for the cords and lines from which it was hung were invisible in the darkness, even through glasses.

"Stand by to mount, Kenneth," said Carfax coolly. "Start both the side engines. Hugh, you will work both the searchlights—turn them on her together when I give the word."

"Is there anything I can do, sir?" asked Sam eagerly.

"Very much so. Take your place by the Maxim, forward, and be ready to handle it smartly as soon as you get the order."

Slowly the Kronenfels came lower, yard by yard, her propellers naturally keeping her steady exactly above the Tower. She was well handled. Presently she stopped, her car just above the level of the high corner towers. She could descend no lower with safety.

"There's something hanging from the car," said Stephen, in a low voice, his glasses to his eyes. "I can just make it out. It drops a long way down—fifty or sixty feet, I think."

"Yes," murmured Carfax, watching intently, "I thought that would be it."

"But what is it?" said Stephen. "I can't see it very well. The lower end's about level with that square upper window in the White Tower. By Jove, there's somebody at the window—I can spot him with the glasses! He's clinging to the sill like a fly, and reaching right out!"

The night-glass, sure enough, showed a man's figure, looking like a tiny black imp at that distance, crouching upon the deep sill of the window, while a dim black line, like a double cobweb, seemed to be reaching down from the airship's car. The moment had arrived.

"Up with her!" cried Carfax. "Turn on the lights!"

Away went the Condor, slanting swiftly ahead and upwards. The instant she was high above the vessels and clear of all obstacles she turned and sped straight towards the Tower. At the same moment her two wide-ranged searchlights shot their brilliant beams ahead, and lit up an extraordinary scene.

The upper ray illuminated the Kronenfels and her car as she hung above the Tower, lighting her up as brightly as day. From the car a light rope ladder dangled, reaching down into space.

The Condor's second search-beam dwelt on the lower end of the ladder, right against the window of the Tower, and showed the man upon the sill in the very act of grasping it. He swung himself off, hanging by his hands, and feeling for the cross-cords with his feet.

"Great Scott, look there!" The cry burst from Stephen's lips. "They're pulling him out of it with a Jacob's ladder!"

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A panic seemed to strike the Kronenfels as the two dazzling rays shot out of the darkness and lit her up. The man on the ladder, swinging in space like a beetle on the end of a thread of cotton, could not regain his former place, even if he wished to. The German airship's crew could be seen casting out ballast with frantic haste; and rising slowly, hand-capped by the extra weight, she cleared the Tower, and then forged blindly ahead as if uncertain which way to flee, the man on the ladder dangling seventy feet below her.

"Forward!" cried Carfax. "Get hold of that ladder, two of you!"

The Condor dashed straight towards the Kronenfels, swooped below her, and slackened speed. The gas airship could no more avoid her than a whale could escape a sword-fish. In a few seconds Carfax's vessel was close under the Kronenfels, the rope-ladder pressing against the Condor's side.

"Cut that away, quick!" cried Carfax. "Double it over the rail, and throw your weight on it! That's it; make fast!"

The German airship, relieved of the hanging weight—which made little or no difference to the swift aeroplane—had shot upwards of her own volition. Away went the Condor after her, soaring out on a long upward slant, and then swooping back again right against the huge gasbag of the Kronenfels, and so close that she seemed about to charge directly into it.

"Give her the Maxim!" called Carfax. "Slap it right into her gas-container!"

With a rattling whirr the little machine-gun opened fire. Sam swivelled the gun so as to shoot downwards over the platform's edge, for the airship's gas-bag, like a vast cushion, was well below him.

There was a loud crackling noise, followed by a tremendous hiss, as the storm of bullets rent and tore the enormous envelope of gold-beater's skin that contained the gas. But the next moment there was a mighty burst of flame, for so near was the gun's muzzle that the gas ignited.

The Call to the Front.

In less time than it takes to tell it the Kronenfels was a mighty ball of fire, and amid a wild rush and roar of flames she began to sink rapidly. The Condor darted away out of reach, for the poisonous, burning fumes poured upwards in great volumes. Down went the blazing airship, slowly at first, but with gathering rapidity as she dropped towards the river. The propellers of her car were still spinning strongly, and the height, when she caught fire, was not great. Down she settled, still blazing, like a huge fairy parachute, into the bosom of the Thames.

"An easy let-down, considering all things," said Kenneth. "I hope the poor beggars pull themselves out of it all right, but we can't attend to them now. By George, our capture's still hanging on with teeth and toenails!" he added, darting to the rail and looking down.

"It's lucky we weren't right over the Kronenfels, or he'd have been grilled," said Sam, jerking out the Maxim's belt and closing the breach. "I never expected her to catch alight like that. Is it our man?"

"I think you'll find it so," said Carfax, keeping the Condor stationary. "Rough usage; but in such jobs as these one must do what one can. Haul him aboard."

"Poor beggar! He must have gone through something," said Sam, as they applied themselves to the rope.

A glance showed the man, far below, clinging to the ladder, with arms and legs twisted among the cord spokes and sides of the ladder in a way that would have taken a great deal to shake loose. He hung there motionless, as if unable to stir. He was heavy and big built, but more than that they could not see.

"Heave gently," said Kenneth, as they began to haul upon the ladder. "He looks as if he were only half-conscious, and we mustn't shake him off. Wouldn't it be better to descend to the earth as we are, sir?"

"No, he is more likely to drop off if we start descending than in any other way, if he's seized with vertigo," said Carfax. "Haul him up as quietly and quickly as possible—unless he can climb up himself."

"Vast heaving!" said Stephen, looking over the side. "He can! Let him make his way up—that'll be safer."

The man on the ladder seemed to have pulled himself together now that the aeroplane had stopped, and he was mounting steadily up the ladder. The Condor's crew watched eagerly, and soon he was nearly level with them. He was

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man of courage and endurance, as was plain enough, and it did not take them long to see that their prisoner was he whom they expected. When the climber's head appeared above the rail, they saw the unmistakable features of Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany.

His strong, grim face was very white, and showed the strain he had undergone. Beads of perspiration stood on his forehead, and his teeth were clenched, but he showed no sign of fear.

Kenneth and Sam helped him over the rail with their hands, beneath his arms, and he staggered slightly as his feet touched the Condor's deck, but recovered himself. Hugh, glancing at his face, drew a tiny silver medicine-flask of brandy from his pocket, but the Kaiser waved it aside. There was a pause, as the captors and captive faced each other.

"Herr Carfax, I presume?" said the Emperor, as soon as he found his voice, looking straight at the aeronaut.

"The same," said Carfax. "I am sorry to put your Majesty to this inconvenience. But your presence," he added drily, "is important to us here in England."

"From your point of view I suppose it is," replied the Kaiser.

"Having held you as a prisoner of war, it would do us very little credit to let you escape. That is my reason for interfering with your Majesty's plans," said Carfax, still more drily.

The Kaiser shrugged his shoulders.

"You had an uncomfortable time of it on the rope-ladder, I fear," concluded Carfax.

"I have experienced danger and discomfort before," said the Kaiser carelessly, and his eyes roved round the other members of the crew. "Ah, I thought so!" he added, as his glance met Sam's. "Wherever I meet with trouble and annoyance, I may be sure of seeing that face not far off. I have met these youngsters before."

Sam bowed.

"Your Majesty does me too much honour," he said. "I am only a spectator this time; the credit is all due to Mr. Carfax."

"I shall be obliged by your answering me a question," said the Kaiser. "News reached London yesterday that my son and heir, the Crown Prince Frederick, had been captured by you in Schleswig, and held a prisoner. Is he safe and unharmed?"

"Have no fear for your son. He is not only safe, but free again," said Carfax. "I exchanged him for your young acquaintance there, Stephen Villiers, who was caught and threatened with execution."

"That's true, sir," said Sam; "and as you are the head of the German Army, I think it would do you more credit if you stopped this shooting of prisoners."

"I do not approve of it," said the Kaiser; "but when civilians are taken in arms against the colours they must certainly pay the penalty. You can hardly blame any of my men for deciding to shoot either of you two, if they get hold of you," said the Emperor to the two boys, with a very grim smile indeed. "You are rather too versatile."

"When the day comes that they are shot," said Carfax, "it will be very unfortunate for Germany if I and the Condor survive them. However, I must now return you to the care of the Tower guard, sir, if you have no objections."

"I believe your Majesty refused to give your parole not to escape, while you were a prisoner," continued Carfax; "but I ask you to give it till I can deliver you to the guard."

"You have it so long as I am with you," replied the Kaiser. "I do not propose to try to escape from the Condor."

Kenneth stepped to the rail, and casting loose the rope-ladder, let it fall. Then the Condor, sweeping back towards the Tower, began to descend.

The Kaiser Brought Back—Bad News from Germany.

The Condor's powerful searchlights played on the grounds and moat of the Tower, and the whole great fortress was humming like a stirred up beehive. Carfax found a spot where there was room for the aeroplane, and down she lit as lightly as a feather.

"Stand there! Who are you?" cried two startled sentries, rifles in hand, as they darted forward.

"British airship Condor," said Carfax. "You ought to know me by this time. Inform the officer of the day."

A young lieutenant of the Scots Guards hurried into the barrack-yard when the watch turned out, and was plainly in a great state of perturbation as Carfax came to meet him.

"I've brought your prisoner back," said the aeronaut.

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed the young officer, as he saw for himself that it was true. "This is an immense relief; I've been seeing myself court-martialled and broke over this business, sir, I can tell you! We saw you— But I must get my charge into his quarters."

The lieutenant advanced, and with a bow to the Kaiser,

requested him civilly to enter the building. The Emperor turned, nodded to Carfax and the boys, and then went without a word.

When the Scots Guards' subaltern returned, he found the Condor's crew looking to their engines and gear, and his gratitude was of the deepest.

"We saw you overhead when the German airship blazed up," he said, "and, of course, we knew what had happened; but we didn't know if you'd got the Kaiser or not. I was in a ghastly stew, I can tell you, when I scooted up to his quarters and found him gone. Well, sir, you've saved me my commission—not that that matters. We're all more grateful than we can say for what you've done."

"That's all right," said Carfax, with a laugh. "You could hardly be expected to reckon on such a rescue as the German airship attempted, I suppose, and as your prisoner is in your keeping again, all's well that ends well. Put him in safer quarters this time—though there isn't much likelihood of another such trial as this, I think. You'll be ready for it yourself next time. And now I must be off, so good-bye to you!"

A brief but hearty farewell was bidden the Condor by the garrison and the corps of yeomen, who would much have liked her to stop. Her crew took their stations, and away she mounted, clearing the battlements and rising upwards over the river.

"Look there—the dawn!" exclaimed Stephen, pointing to the fast-lightening eastern sky. "I never dreamed it was so late!"

"We've spent longer over the business than we thought," said Carfax, rising still, and turning the aeroplane westwards.

"What now, sir?" said Sam.

"Well, I think we've earned a rest. It's been a pretty hard night all round, and a long one," said the aeronaut. "It was hardly the place to stay, at the Tower, and I wanted to get away from that neighbourhood. We'll put her on the ground and go easy for a spell, and after that I think we must make all speed back to the front, where we're most wanted."

"Where shall we drop her, sir?" said Kenneth. "We want privacy and a safe place if we're to beach her."

"Kennington Oval," said Carfax; "that will do us nicely."

"I'll bet we draw as big a gate as some of the best matches, if we were on show," remarked Stephen; "but privacy's the ticket, of course."

The Condor passed swiftly south-westwards, and covered the journey in a very short time. She arrived over the famous cricket-ground in the grey of the dawn, and settled quietly on the wet turf, near the pavilion.

An astonished caretaker was soon on the scene, but Kenneth soon put things right. He ensured that the Condor should have complete privacy while she remained there, and that no one but the officials should enter the enclosure. Then, glad enough to do so, the crew turned in; Carfax alone—the man of iron—choosing to lie awake and smoke, and watch.

It was ten o'clock when the boys woke, and, stepping out of the airship on to the turf, the first thing they heard was the shouting of newsboys in the streets near by, selling the ten o'clock "specials," and, by the sound, there was tidings of great importance.

"Will that be the account of our little affair last night?" said Stephen, as they went towards the entrance.

"Likely enough," said Sam; "for it would have been too late for the morning papers. Rather fun to get a copy and see—eh?"

But it was with a shock of surprise and dismay that the young scouts learned the real nature of the news which was being shouted. A newsboy ran towards them, calling at the top of his voice:

"Speshul! Defeat of the Allies at Luneville—paper! French and British forces surrounded by the Germans! Great disaster feared—speshul!"

A Sudden Departure.

"Hi! Paper! This way!" shouted Sam eagerly, darting out after the newsboy, who had such a sale for his papers that morning that he charged a shilling a copy. The brothers opened the sheet hastily.

"What an awful disaster!" exclaimed Stephen. "Where is it? Let's see. It can't mean the whole French Army's beaten?"

"Good Heavens, no! Don't suggest such a thing. But it's a bad set back," said Sam; and he read out the telegram from the "Stop-press" news.

"BRITISH AND FRENCH DEFEAT!"

"News is to hand, from an authoritative source, that the French Brigade under General Du Plessay, with which is joined the British Division commanded by Major-General Stuart-Ogilvie, has sustained a severe defeat by an overwhelming force of Prussian and Wurtemberg troops."

"The allied forces, British and French, held out with

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great gallantry during an engagement of eight hours, and finally was forced to fall back on the village of Clunard, near Luneville, with heavy loss. They are said to be cut off from further retreat, and are in danger of annihilation by the Germans.

"The French are at present unable to send help to the threatened division, since no troops can be spared from their main front near Metz.

"The position is a most perilous one for Du Plessay and the French and British troops with him, and further news is awaited with great anxiety."

Sam concluded the paragraph with a short, sharp whistle of dismay.

"Great Caesar!" exclaimed Stephen, seizing the paper. "Then the French Army's beaten—or near to it!"

"No; not quite so bad as that, though it's bad enough. The French main army isn't under Du Plessay. His is another division, further east, that's threatened. And it looks like gettin' wiped out, and a lot of our men, too."

"It'll be a thundering big disaster, then."

"Yes; you can see pretty well what's happened. The main army of the French, as I suppose you know, gave the Germans a licking or two on the frontier, and has pushed on into Germany. It's now near Metz, and the principal forces of both countries are at a deadlock there, hammering away at each other."

"Yes—well?"

"But further along eastwards, beyond the main armies, a big German force, under Von Ritter, has returned the compliment by pushing round into France. General Du Plessay has met it with a French force, but he isn't strong enough to hold it back. See?"

"That's clear enough. So, if this chap Von Ritter cuts Du Plessay up, he'll be able to go ahead into France and ravage it."

"Or, worse still, move round an' attack the French main army from the rear, and cut off their lines of communication. It might very well mean the smashing up of the French altogether."

Both the young scouts realised to the full how bad the news was. For a few moments neither spoke.

"British regiments with them, too!" said Stephen presently. "I didn't know we had sent any to France."

"Oh, yes; a whole Army Corps! They aren't all up in North Germany. General Stuart-Ogilvie is with Du Plessay, it seems; an' I know he's got the Gordon Highlanders with him, the Welsh Borderers, and other regiments, besides guns. Hallo, here's a confounded crowd collecting!"

The news of the Condor's arrival had spread rapidly, for she had been seen in the Oval, and thousands were flocking to the spot in the hope of seeing the famous airship, for the tidings of her adventure at the Tower were now leaking out. Many among the crowd recognised the boys as they left the gates, and hearty cheers were raised.

"Hurrah for young Villiers! Good old Condor! Give the Germans blazes! She'll settle the French job! Hoist the young 'uns up!"

"Let's get back. This is no time for a blessed scene," said Sam, diving back into the enclosure impatiently. "Ah, here's the chief!"

Carfax came striding towards them, a cablegram in his hand, and his face was grim and anxious.

"You've heard the news, sir?" cried Sam.

"Yes, it's a bad look-out," said Carfax, frowning.

"Can't we give some help?"

"We start in five minutes for France, and we shall do all we can," said Carfax; and the boys' faces lit up. "Nip aboard as quickly as possible, youngsters, for there's sharp work ahead of us. Who's this?"

A tall, alert-looking man in a frock-coat came walking swiftly from the pavilion gates towards Carfax. Sam recognised him. It was Sir Richard White, one of the chief War Office officials, and

glancing around, he greeted the little party hastily and warmly.

"Morning, Carfax! I heard you were here, and hurried down to see you," he said. "Congratulations of the Government on the splendid work you've done, especially the preventing of that escape last night. You've heard the bad news from France, I expect?"

"Yes; and I see what a catastrophe it's likely to lead to, Sir Richard," said the aeronaut; "a child might understand that."

"You're right. It's a black look-out unless France can help Du Plessay out of it, which she seems unable to do at present. It looks as if poor Stuart-Ogilvie is done for. But where help is to come from is more than—"

"I am starting for the front immediately," said Carfax. "Whatever the Condor can do will be done, though it's not sure that I can give much help. This is a military business entirely. I shall be there by this afternoon, though."

"Good! I was hoping you could go," said Sir Richard with great relief. "We trust in you. The presence of the Condor alone will be an immense encouragement to the allies, and will trouble the Germans greatly. I know you'll do all you can."

"If your Government hadn't tied my hands by stopping my first campaign, it would be only a matter of hours before I could set the whole thing right," said Carfax; "but there are more ways of helping than one. I mustn't linger here, Sir Richard. Kenneth! Hugh! Get her under way, there!"

The Condor's crew was instantly aboard her, the fans began to whirl, and the great aeroplane lifted herself from the historic cricket-ground and mounted rapidly. As she came into view, a mighty roar of cheers greeted her from the crowded streets. For an instant she poised, swung round, and then, slanting away towards the skies with one long rush, she headed for France.

"She's moving this time!" exclaimed Stephen; for the engines seemed to go with a swifter, cleaner action than ever. "But we've got to get right away to North-East France and the German frontier. Did you mean it, sir, when you said we could be there by this afternoon?"

"Yes, well before sunset," replied Carfax. "There's a westerly gale blowing, with a velocity of quite fifty miles an hour. You hardly feel it, as she is travelling on the wings of it, but it's an enormous help, none the less. The Condor was never going in better style, either."

"Top speed of revolutions we've ever made, sir," called Kenneth, from the engine-house, "for passage-making!"

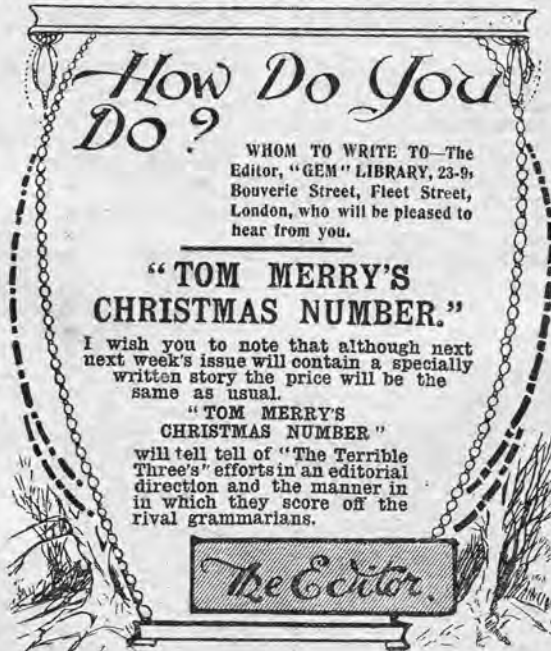
London was already rapidly fading out, and the Weald of Kent seemed to be slipping away from under them like a panorama gone mad. The Condor was much closer to the earth than she generally travelled, and the boys remarked on it.

"This wind is blowing strongest about a couple of hundred feet from the ground," said Carfax, "and we're going to make use of the full strength of it. Unhigher it's much less, which is often the way with north-westerly cyclones. We've nothing to fear from any enemy till we reach our goal, and the more we see, and the faster we travel, the better."

"I wonder how they're holding out yonder?" said Stephen anxiously, looking ahead, as though he would bridge over the distance to Luneville at one stride. "It'll be awful, won't it, if we arrive to find the Germans have wiped the allies out?"

"It's not likely to be done as quickly as that, I think," said Sam; "though there's no saying. The French infantry are the finest fighters on the Continent. There are our chaps as well; and you don't need telling what they can do, specially when they're cornered."

(Another instalment next week.)



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