

'KILDARE OF ST. JIM'S.' A Tale of Tom Merry & Co.

The

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VOL. 4.

Grand Long
Complete
Tale.

A Tale of the Terrible Three.

by
MARTIN
CLIFFORD.



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"THE ST. JIM'S RINKERIES."

A Tale of Tom Merry & Co.
By Martin Clifford.

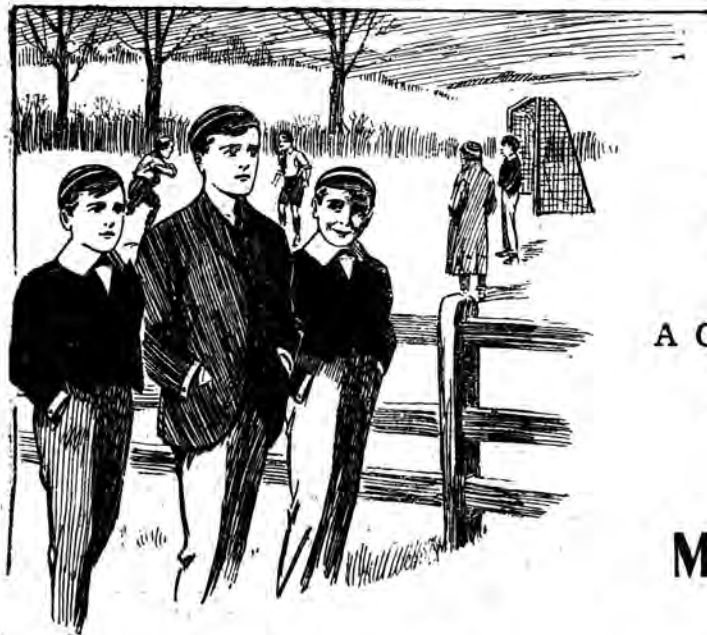
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KILDARE OF ST. JIM'S.

A Grand, Long, Complete School
Tale of
TOM MERRY & CO.

.. BY ..

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy Makes a Boast.

"WHAT'S up?"

Tom Merry uttered an exclamation of surprise and started to run.

Manners and Monty Lowther pelted after their chief.

Down the hill, round by the thatched village smithy; and then, a little further on, they sprinted past the butcher's shop.

"It's Gussy!" gasped Tom Merry.

The Terrible Three—that is to say, Tom Merry, Manners, and Monty Lowther—broke through a little group of village lads standing in the middle of the road, and stared in amazement at their chum, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

The swell of St. Jim's was speaking, and very indignantly, too.

"Wubbish!" he exclaimed, just as Tom Merry & Co. appeared. "Wubbish!"

There was a general laugh from the villagers.

"Haw, haw, haw!"

Bob Gregory, the butcher's burly son, roared with delight.

"That there's a good 'un! Haw, haw, haw!"

Arthur Augustus screwed his monocle into his eye, and surveyed the humorist with a frigid glance.

Bob Gregory grinned, and shuffled his feet.

"What's up?" cried Tom Merry, catching the swell of St. Jim's by his arm. "What the dickens are you doing? Holding a meeting, or what?"

Arthur Augustus waved his arm dramatically.

"It's a mattah of dig. to the coll.!" he cried.

"Dig. to the coll.!" What d'you mean by that?" demanded Tom Merry.

"Master D'Arcy says as your capt'n could lick Bill Forman!" shouted Bob Gregory, constituting himself the

spokesman of the ring of grinning village boys. "That's what he says. Haw, haw, haw!"

There was nothing but good humour in Bob's laugh, but Tom Merry felt his face grow red. Anything that affected the honour of the college was likely to stir him up, and Manners and Monty Lowther also felt called upon to show their interest by shouldering their way a little nearer to Bob Gregory.

"Nonsense!" cried Tom Merry sharply. "Besides, what has our captain to do with Bill Forman?"

For a moment there was no reply to Tom Merry's question. The form of his demand seemed to have reduced the villagers to silence.

"What has Kildare to do with Bill Forman?" repeated the chief of the Terrible Three.

"That's it!" said Manners.

"We should like to know!" cried Monty Lowther.

"I will settle the mattah, Tom Mewwy!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "I will administah—"

"No, you won't!" retorted Tom Merry. "Look here," he went on in a lower voice, "you've been making a mess of things, as usual."

The swell of St. Jim's sniffed indignantly.

"Nothin' of the kind, I assuah you. I—"

"Will you or somebody answer my question?" shouted Tom Merry impatiently.

Bob Gregory hunched his shoulders, and took a step nearer.

"So far as we knows," he said, "your capt'n ain't nothing to do with our Bill, an' if Master D'Arcy hadn't 'ave said nothing we—"

"Well?"

"We shouldn't have said nothing neither."

There was a chorus of words of approval from the village boys.

A DOUBLE-LENGTH TALE OF TOM MERRY NEXT THURSDAY.

No. 100 (New Series).

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Tom Merry looked round in despair.

"Blessed if I can make head or tail of it," he said.

"You see, it's like this," said Bob Gregory slowly.

"Master D'Arcy is a bit 'ot tempered, and—"

Bob Gregory stopped, and scratched his ear.

"And it's getting late!" suggested Manners.

"Haw, haw, haw!"

Tom Merry frowned, and looked as if he felt inclined to give up the inquiry.

"Pway allow me to explain," said Arthur Augustus hurriedly. "I was passin' and I ovaheard these wottahs. One of them said, if I wemembah the pweise form of the expweession, that there was nobody for ten miles woud could touch Bill Foahman—"

"Well?"

"I wemonstwated!"

"Silly ass!"

"I wufuse to be called a silly ass. I considah that Kildare, if he liked, could thwash any boundah in Wylcombe."

"If he liked!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "I dare say he could, but that's nothing to do with the question. You know very well that Kildare is not a Third Form kid, and it's not likely he's going to fight anybody that comes along. Bill Forman's a good sort of boxer, but—"

"Hear, hear!"

"Not half he ain't!"

"Licked Sam the Sailor over to Diddlecoat Fair!"

The villagers shouted in their pride in Bill Forman.

"Look here!" cried Tom Merry. "Look here you, Bob Gregory, and you others. Our captain is not going to fight Bill or anybody else."

"Why?" shouted a voice from the back of the ring.

"Because he's the captain of St. Jim's," retorted Tom Merry indignantly, "and he's not likely to go round fighting at beastly fairs or anywhere else. I'm off."

"We never said nothing about 'im!" muttered Bob Gregory doggedly. "We was talking about un—Bill Forman—and Master D'Arcy comes up an ses the capt'n was a better man."

"Boo!"

This was followed by a hiss, and the sound of running feet.

Tom Merry turned sharply.

"It weren't us!" declared several of the village boys.

"Who was it, then? Hallo!"

"It's some Gwammah cads!" shouted Arthur Augustus. "Let's wun affah them! Thwee of them!"

"No good," growled Tom Merry. "Let 'em go. They've got two hundred start; besides, we must get back. Come on, Gussy. You go on in front where we can keep an eye on you and see you don't get into mischief."

"He'll be wanting to challenge the village bobby next!" chuckled Manners.

"There ain't no ill-feeling, Master D'Arcy," said Bob Gregory, "is there?"

"Undah the circes, deah boy, no," replied the swell of St. Jim's. "I wegwet that I misappwehended youah wemahks."

"Bravo!" shouted a shrill voice.

"But you oughter see Bill," said Bob, as the juniors prepared to depart, and grinning all over his round face. "He's a daisy! A reg'lar out an' outer!"

"P'waps I shall, deah boy; it's extremewly pwob, for when I leave St. Jim's I shall go to the National Sportin' Club, and—"

"Oh, come on! Good-night, you chaps!" shouted Tom Merry, seizing the swell of St. Jim's. "You're not going to leave St. Jim's just yet, so come along!"

The four juniors departed, and the village boys dispersed to their various homes, disappearing into the January gloom with many "Good-nights!" to one another, and shouts of "See you in the marnin'!"

For the next ten minutes the village street wore its usual deserted appearance, then three dim figures passed the spot of the recent argument, and with quiet tread proceeded in the direction of the Rylcombe printer's little shop.

CHAPTER 2.

The Grammarians' Scheme.

"WHAT a lark!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The taller of the three mysterious, stealthy figures turned sharply to his companions.

"Shut your noise, Larking!" he growled. "You know very well that the village kids crawl like anything to the college brats, and if any of them should hear your stupid cackle or what we've been talking about, the game will be U.P."

"All right, Snipe," whispered Larking. "Don't you THE GEN LIBRARY.—No. 100.

NEXT THURSDAY:

"THE ST. JIM'S RINKERIES!"

MARTIN CLIFFORD,

worry your little self. You're mighty clever in your own way, but Carpenter and I have been at the Grammar School a sight longer than you, and you can bet we know the ropes. What d'you say, Carpenter?"

The latter nodded his head, and walked along in silence.

Sidney Carpenter was not a very bright specimen, but he was decidedly the least vicious and mean-minded of the three Grammarians.

Outside the dimly-lighted window of the little printer's the three pulled up.

"I say," said Edward Snipe, "suppose the old chap twigs and won't print it?"

"Oh!"

There was consternation in the voices of Larking and Carpenter.

"Never thought of that!" muttered Larking.

"No, you never do think of anything!" retorted Snipe. "Trust you for that. I always have to manage the bramy side of a wheeze. What?"

Larking grunted something, and stared moodily down the dark street.

Then Snipe suddenly began to chuckle.

"Don't see anything to make that silly row about!" grumbled Carpenter. "The best thing we can do is to get back. I'm sick of hanging about this beastly village. Let's get those fags, and scoot!"

Edward Snipe laughed maliciously.

"What's up?" demanded Larking. "Got something up your sleeve?"

"No; in my pocket!"

"In your pocket?"

"Yes. Ha, ha, ha!"

Snipe fumbled in his overcoat pocket.

The two others watched him curiously.

"Well, I'm jiggered!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"A college cap!" exclaimed Larking.

"That's it, my beauty," replied Snipe, displaying his prize cautiously. "Grabbed it off one of the Third Form kids last week for a lark, and stuck it in my pocket. Never thought it would come in handy."

"What a bit of luck!" cried Carpenter. "All you have to do is to stick it on. March in, and there you are!"

"Oh, am I?" retorted Snipe. "Not so fast, my pippin. This is where you come in!"

"But—"

"No buts. If you funk it, say so!" exclaimed Snipe.

"I don't funk it, and you know I don't!" cried Carpenter hotly. "Only I don't see why I should wear it. Why not Larking, then?"

Larking was conveniently silent.

Snipe scowled.

"Look here," he said, after a moment's pondering. "We'll all try it on, and the one it fits the best goes in. Eh?"

"All right," agreed Carpenter. "I suppose you know already that the thing won't fit you!"

Edward Snipe did not reply.

He removed his own cap, and clapped on the St. Jim's colours. He had rather a big head, and his coarse hair stuck out like bits of string all the way round.

"It certainly doesn't fit very well," commented Carpenter, with a grin. "You do look a—"

"What?"

Snipe snatched the cap from his head, and glared angrily at his two companions.

"You seem to think it funny!" he snapped.

"Oh, no; not a bit!" said Carpenter airily. "Let's have a try. No. Too small for me. There you are, Larking!"

Larking took the St. Jim's cap, and twirled it in his hand.

"Buck up!" said Snipe. "Stick it on!"

Larking reluctantly removed his cap.

"Fits you like the paper on the wall!" cried Carpenter.

"Capital!" said Snipe. "You look the real thing! Old stick-in-the-mud will take you for Tom Merry!" he added, with a sly glance at Carpenter.

The latter grinned. The idea of Larking's foxy face being mistaken for Tom Merry's open countenance was a tall order, but Larking did not see anything wrong, so the pair did not enlighten him.

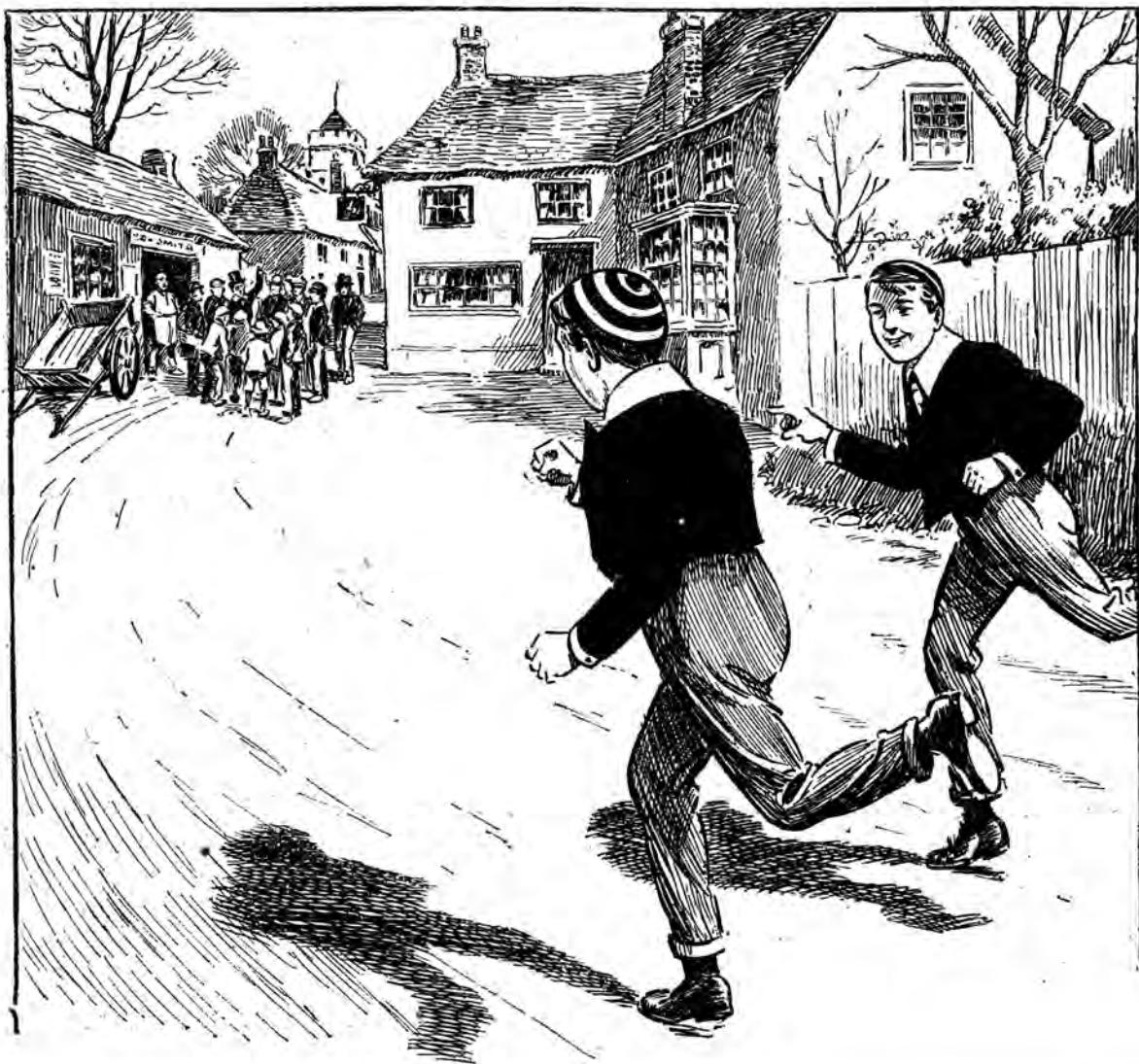
"What shall I say?" he muttered, placing his own cap in his pocket.

"Why, you know!" said Snipe. "Surely we haven't got to go over the whole rignmarole again. Here, lend me a pencil, somebody!"

Carpenter handed over a stubby bit of pencil.

"Lemme see!" muttered Snipe, sucking the dirty little bit of blacklead and scowling at an equally begrimed half-sheet of paper he had taken from his pocket. "Why, we settled it all just now!"

"No, we didn't!" exclaimed Carpenter. "We didn't go into detail. All we said was that we'd get out a challenge!"



Tom Merry uttered an exclamation of surprise, and started to run, "Why, it's Gussy!" he gasped.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Snipe chuckled gleefully.

"Well, the first thing is 'Challenge'—eh?"

"That's it!" said Carpenter.

Larking looked over Snipe's shoulder, and nodded his head while the former wrote.

After a few moments he held the slip of paper at arm's length.

The trio chuckled hugely.

"In you go, then!" exclaimed Snipe, thrusting the paper into Larking's reluctant hand. "Look sharp about it, too, or we shall get locked out. It's late now. We'll wait for you round the corner. Tell the printer to make a dozen copies, and to have them ready first thing in the morning."

Larking nodded, and pulled the stolen cap down over his eyes. He slouched to the door of the little shop, and while Snipe and Carpenter waited in the gloom, they heard the tinkle of the bell over the door.

Larking stood in front of the old counter, and felt his heart thump with nervousness.

The printer, a short-sighted little man, came bustling out of the parlour at the back of the shop.

He rubbed his hands together briskly as he peered forward and noticed the familiar St. Jim's cap.

"Evening, Master—"

The printer paused, and leaned over his counter.

Larking fidgeted uneasily, and racked his brains for a name. He had sense enough to know that he dared not call himself Tom Merry. What was the chap with Blake? Dig—Dig—Larking did some hard thinking.

"Digby!" he blurted at last.

"Oh, yes, to be sure!" exclaimed the printer. "I remember your name. Well, and what can I do for you?"

Larking laid the half sheet of paper down in front of the man.

The printer took it to the hanging lamp, and peered at it closely.

"Dear me!" he muttered, half aloud. "Dear me!"

"I—I—I want you to let us have a dozen copies by to-morrow morning," said the Grammar School boy, in a strained voice.

"But this is very curious!" exclaimed the printer. "Are you sure there's no mistake?"

"N-n-no!"

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 100.

NEXT
THURSDAY:

"THE ST. JIM'S RINKERIES!"

By
MARTIN CLIFFORD.

The Rylcombe printer eyed the shivering Larking over the top of his spectacles.

"It's—it's a joke!" cried the boy, with a flash of inspiration. "A—jape!"

The frown of perplexity cleared away from the printer's forehead at once. He little knew how true and yet how false was the explanation.

"Ah, I see!" he exclaimed. "Oh, well, of course, that explains it. Very well, Master Digby. You shall have the sheets by the morning. I'll send them up."

"No, no, don't do that!" gasped Larking. "Don't trouble. I'll call."

"No trouble. I'll send the boy. I've got some proofs of the 'Weekly' to send Master Merry in the morning, and these can go at the same time."

The unfortunate Larking squirmed like a fish on a hook. This fresh difficulty nearly floored him. He could think of nothing.

"Very well," he managed to say at last. "What time did you say?"

"About eight o'clock, Master Digby."

The printer impaled the half-sheet of paper on a file.

A fresh terror struck a chill to Larking's heart.

At all costs he must take that paper away with him. The handwriting might give them all away.

"Would you—will you take a copy?" he said, in a voice that he strove hard to keep steady. "You see, I—we—that is, Tom Merry, asked me to bring it back. I think he wants it for something. I don't know what."

Greatly to the Grammarian's relief, and not a little to his surprise, the printer made no demur. He copied the infamous challenge, and handed Larking his dirty little scrap of paper.

Larking made for the door. A sigh of relief left his lips. Then he gave a jump of fright.

The little printer had rushed round the counter, and for the moment Larking's evil conscience had made a bigger coward of him than ever. He gave an almost hysterical giggle as the man opened the door and bowed him out.

"Good evening, Master Digby!"

Snipe and Carpenter heard the name, and they drew further back into their hiding-place.

"Digby!" gasped the latter.

"Can't be!" muttered Snipe. "Sh-h-h-h!"

By now it had grown very dark and misty.

Larking peered about him.

"Snipe—Carpenter!"

There was no mistaking that peevish voice.

"Here!" whispered Snipe. "What the dickens did he mean by it? He called you Digby!"

Larking chuckled feebly.

"Of course!" he said.

"Of course!" grunted Snipe. "Don't see any 'of course' about it at all. Surely he didn't mistake you for Digby, did he?"

"Why not?" demanded Larking. "Why shouldn't he? If you want to know, he asked my name, and I said Digby."

"What nerve!" grunted Carpenter.

"Jolly smart!" declared Snipe.

"Yes. And," went on Larking, "I've got the copy back, too. You never thought of that, did you?"

Snipe evaded this thrust at his leadership.

"Better be going now," he said. "You can stick that cap in your pocket now. Come on!"

The three Grammarians walked off in the direction of their school.

They were silent until the village lay far behind.

"When will the bills be ready?" inquired Snipe, as the lights of the school appeared in the distance.

Larking did not reply.

"Well?" demanded Snipe.

"In the morning," muttered Larking. "But—"

"What?"

"Well, you see, he—" Larking stopped again.

"What the dickens are you mumbling about?" cried Snipe.

"He said he would send them," said Larking.

"Send them?"

"Mighty kind of him!" added Carpenter.

"Nonsense!" cried Snipe. "How can he send them? You must be a drivelling idiot, Carpenter! Send them to the Grammar School?"

"He said he would send them to St. Jim's with—"

"What?"

Snipe stopped short and glared at his companion.

"I couldn't help it," said Larking desperately. "He was so—so—"

"So me hat!" growled Carpenter. "You're a silly fool, that's what you are! Here's a nice kettle of fish! Why, you must be mad!"

"Rats!" said Larking. "You would have done the same. If I'd insisted he might have got suspicious. If I hadn't have got round him by telling him it was a jape he would never have taken the order. He squinted at the beastly thing like anything."

Snipe gave a hollow groan.

"This licks me!" he said. "For goodness' sake explain everything. I can't make head or tail of it. We must have this clear before we go in."

Under considerable pressure the account of the proceedings was dragged from Larking bit by bit.

"I can see what it was," said Carpenter, at the conclusion of the involved statement. "You were in a beastly fright, and I don't believe you knew what you were doing half the time."

"Didn't I? Oh, yes, I did!" snapped Larking. "Well, you can jolly well do what you like. I've done with it."

"Oh, have you?" sneered Snipe. "I don't think! Who gave the order, eh? I can fancy old Monk wanting to know who did the trick, and—"

He paused significantly. Larking felt a cold shiver run up and down his back. He eyed his companions with an evil look.

There was a long silence, and the three walked slower and slower as they approached the school.

"We must get hold of those notices," muttered Snipe.

"Queen Anne's dead!" grunted Carpenter.

"Oh, shut up!"

Suddenly Larking gave a sort of squeal of delight.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed, in a low voice. "We must waylay the boy in the morning. You know the footpath through the spinney. All we've got to do is to collar him, and the trick's done."

A curious expression came over Snipe's face. At first he had been inclined to jeer, then his eyes narrowed.

"That's not half a bad idea of yours, Larking, but you forget that there's bound to be a rumpus. What are we going to do with the chap after we've got the stuff? No. It won't do."

Larking was silent.

"I've got a better idea than that," went on Snipe slowly.

"All you can do is to meet him yourself."

"Meet him my—myself?" gasped Larking.

"Yes, meet him yourself!" mimicked Snipe. "Don't you see, idiot, you've got the cap, you've got the name, and you'll get the plunder, too! He, he, he!"

"I won't do anything of the kind!" spluttered Larking.

"You're a couple of cowards, that's what you are! You want me to do everything."

"Oh, no, we don't!" replied Snipe virtuously. "I'd do it like a shot, but you know very well that I can't. Look here, if you slip out in the morning, and nip along by the Head's kitchen garden, you can hop across to the other end of the footpath and stroll down to meet the printer's boy. You just hold out your hand, and he'll be jolly glad to save himself the walk. Just mention casually that you're Digby, and the St. Jim's lot'll be so mixed up that they'll never find out our wheeze. You can do it all right, old chap. You've got a splendid nerve, you know!"

Carpenter grinned at this outrageous bit of flattery, but Larking swallowed the bait without a thought.

"Very well, then," he said, half reluctantly. "I'll do it, but—"

"Good!"

"Bravo, Larking!"

"But you've got to come with me."

On this point Larking was determined, and although Snipe and Carpenter tried every argument, he remained as stubborn as a mule.

"I won't go alone, and that's flat!" he said. "You can jolly well do what you like, but if you want me to take on the Digby act again you've got to come too. You can hide in the spinney, and if anything goes wrong you'll be in it as well as yours truly. See?"

To this Snipe and Carpenter had to agree, and then the three conspirators slunk past the gate.

Before they got to the entrance to the Grammar School they separated, and no one was aware, when they came one after the other into the common room, that they had broken bounds together.

CHAPTER 3.

D'Arcy's Brilliant Idea!

"NOT there!" exclaimed Tom Merry, as he shot the door of Study No. 6. "Not there, my children! I expect they're in our study. Come on, Gussy!"

"I refuse! I— Oh, wats!"

Manners and Monty Lowther marshalled the unwilling swell of St. Jim's along the corridor.

"I desiah to change. I—"

"You're not going until we place you in charge of Jack Blake," declared Tom Merry. "You're not safe. Here we are. I can hear the sounds of sweet voices. Hist! Ha, ha!"

The Terrible Three pulled up in front of their own door.

"So you are here?" exclaimed the chief of the famous Co., as the four trooped in. "We've brought you something. Found it in the village, creating a disturbance. Hand him over, you chaps. Better take a receipt for it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Manners and Monty Lowther propelled the swell of St. Jim's into Jack Blake's arms.

The tip of D'Arcy's elegant patent leather boot descended on Jack Blake's toe.

"Wow!" he yelled.

"Kindly examine it, Jack Blake. This, I mean!" went on Tom Merry, pointing at Arthur Augustus. "Go over it carefully, and see it's all there. We had a terrible job to bring it along. I notice you haven't thanked us yet, either."

"No, and not likely to!" grunted Jack Blake, nursing his foot.

"There's gratitude for you!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Hallo, you two! Glad you've made yourself at home! Bring a footstool for Digby, Manners, and a hot-water bottle for Herries, Lowther."

The Fourth-Formers grinned.

"Don't trouble!" said Digby, making himself comfortable in the best armchair. "I'm all right, thanks! I dare say we shall have tea—presently. I like mine rather strong. What? Ha, ha, ha!"

The swell of St. Jim's was turning up his cuffs.

Tom Merry watched him intently.

"Going to wash your hands, Gussy?"

Arthur Augustus placed his monocle in his waistcoat pocket and advanced.

The chief of the Terrible Three retreated behind Jack Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"No you don't!" exclaimed the leader of Study No. 6, promptly executing a side step. "I'm not going to act as a beastly buffer. I know what Gussy is once he's riled."

Tom Merry dodged behind the armchair containing Digby. The swell of St. Jim's followed, and stumbled over his chum's legs. He went down with a crash.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors laughed unfeelingly.

"Wottahs!"

Arthur Augustus picked himself up and looked round for Tom Merry.

That worthy grinned at him cheerfully from the safe side of the table.

"I don't like the look in your eye, Gussy," he said, wagging a forefinger. "Until you explain your intentions I shall refuse to come near you."

"I desiah to administah a faithful thwashin'!"

"Oh, Gussy! Whom are you going to thrash?"

"Don't wot. Wemove that table, and let me awwive at close quarters."

"Not me! I don't want to get slaughtered!" replied Tom Merry promptly. "This is no laughing matter, Jack Blake. For goodness' sake stroke his back, or do something."

Arthur Augustus made a dash to the left.

Tom Merry whisked round to the right, dashed off at a sharp angle, and took up a fresh position behind Herries.

Out came the swell of St. Jim's monocle. He surveyed the chief of the Terrible Three with an indignant glance.

"I considah you are a poltween!" he exclaimed.

"My aunt!" chuckled Jack Blake. "What's that? Something to eat?"

Arthur Augustus sniffed.

"I believe you are in league with Tom Mewwy!" he remarked. "I request you to collah him!"

Jack Blake regarded Tom Merry with a thoughtful air.

"I don't think that would be quite fair, Gussy. Must play the game, you know. You can't expect me to hold him while you pummel him, can you? Besides, what's the row about? If anyone ought to be angry it's me. I'm not a bit. Look at me."

"I wefuse to do anythin' so wicidulous," cried the swell of St. Jim's, glazing straight at the Fourth-Former. "I considah youah wemarks uttahly wedic. What are you gwinnin' at, Mannahs?"

"I was thinking what a good job it was that we came upon you when we did," chuckled Manners. "You'd have gone on and on and on, until the village kids would have made mincemeat of you."

"What's that?" cried Jack Blake, pricking up his ears.

"What have you been up to, Gussy?"

"Quarrelling in the public street," exclaimed Monty Lowther; "with a lot of village kids, too. Shocking, isn't it?"

The swell of St. Jim's turned scarlet.

Blake, Digby, and Herries stared at him in surprise.

"So you have been up to something!" declared Jack Blake. "Pon my word, you're a terror, Gussy. Can't leave you for five minutes. What did you go down to the village for, anyway?"

"I was weturnin' fwom—"

"I asked why you went," interrupted Jack Blake. "We know how you came back. What did you go for, and what did you do?"

"I wefuse to be cwow-examined in this wicidulous mannah, Jack Blake. 'I meahly wemonstrated with Bob Gwegewy, who was labouwin' undah an ewwah."

"Under a what?"

"An ewwah."

"The fact of the matter is," said Tom Merry, from behind his fortress, "he was having a row, and we came up, explained matters for him, and brought him home."

"I was not havin' a wow!" declared the swell of St. Jim's. "I considah a wow in the stweest most vulgah."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Manners and Monty Lowther laughed outright.

"Anyhow, you offered to give somebody a fearful thrashing," cried Manners.

"An entiahly diffewent mattah," retorted Arthur Augustus. "To chastise a wottah is the duty of ewvey respectable membah of St. Jim's. To have a wow in the public stweest uttahly wewehensible and vulgah."

"Come off it, Gussy!" said Lowther rudely. "You're gassing so much that you forget what you are saying before you've said it—I mean before you've thought about it. Oh, rats! Well, you know what I mean."

"Better take a rest, Monty," said Jack Blake soothingly; "you're getting mixed."

Monty Lowther rose, and looked like warfare.

"I'll mix you," he said, "if you're not careful!"

"Not here," declared Tom Merry—"not here! You do your mixing somewhere else. I tidied up the study this afternoon. No, Gussy, not you, either. I apologise."

The swell of St. Jim's dropped his hands to his side.

"At last we have peace in the wigwam," chuckled Jack Blake. "Draw up, you chaps, and let's have tea."

At the word tea the door opened.

Fatty Wynn looked in.

All the juniors looked up.

"Talk of tea, and sure enough Fatty hears the word," cried Tom Merry. "What are you doing here, Fatty? I wish you New House bounders would keep in your kennel."

The Falstaff of St. Jim's grinned cheerfully as he shut the door.

"Dame Taggles has some fine sausages!" he observed, wedging his portly person between Digby and Herries. "Prime! I thought I'd come and tell you."

"What for?"

"Broke!" replied Fatty Wynn, in a word that was short and understood by all.

"Open confession," cried Tom Merry, "is good for something besides the soul. Where are the others?"

"Figgy and Kerr are going to have tea in Hall, I think."

"And you?"

"Oh, I'll have mine with you chaps if you like," said Fatty placidly. "I've nothing to do, so I'll cook for you."

"Cook what?"

"Sausages, of course!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fatty Wynn looked round the ring of smiling faces with twinkling eyes. His faith in the capacity of the assembled Co.'s for producing funds was greater than that of Figgy and Kerr.

Tom Merry looked at Jack Blake.

The latter shook his head and tapped his pocket significantly.

"I will stand a feed, deah boys," said the swell of St. Jim's.

"Bravo!"

"Hooray!"

"Good old Gussy!"

"That's the best of being a millionaire," cried Tom Merry, with a laugh. "Why, I believe if it were not for you, Gussy, we should all be walking skelingtons. As for Fatty, why, we shouldn't recognise him. But we're not going to sponge on you, old chap. You can lend us the dibs. I shall have some tin by the end of the week, and I can let you have it back."

"Hear, hear!" cried Manners. "We'll go shares."

"I wefuse!" declared Arthur Augustus. "I shall wegahd it as a pleasuah, deah boys."

"Yes, we know all about that," said Tom Merry; "but there's not going to be any feed in this study to-night if you're not sensible."

"Vowey well, then, I pwotest, but undah the circs. I agwee."

"That's better!"

Fatty Wynn made for the door.

"Sha'n't be a tick, chaps! Got the frying-pan ready, and, oh, shall I tell Figgy and Kerr?"

"Of course!" cried Tom Merry. "You don't suppose THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 100.

By

we're going to stuff while they're breaking their teeth on the hard crust in Hall."

After Fatty's departure the study became a hive of activity. There was a merry chatter of voices, and the clatter of teacups. Manners attended to the frying-pan, Lowther filled the kettle. All found something to do towards helping to prepare the feast, except the swell of St. Jim's, who stood on the hearthrug and carefully adjusted his tie.

"Buck up, old son!" cried Jack Blake, bringing his hand down on D'Arcy's shoulder. "Hallo, what have I done now?"

"Wottah!" exclaimed the swell of St. Jim's indignantly. "You've wumped my tie again."

"Tut, tut!" exclaimed Jack Blake seriously. "Let me put it straight for you. What? No?"

"I'd watah not, deah boy," cried Arthur Augustus, retreating quickly. "I pwefah to awwange it myself. Pway get out of my way, Mewwy. I wish to look in the miwwow."

The swell of St. Jim's had not occupied his place in front of the looking-glass more than ten seconds, when Fatty Wynn returned laden with a huge bag.

"Figgins and Kerr are just coming!" he panted. "Phew! I'm quite hot. How's the fire?"

Without the slightest compunction, and all business, the Falstaff of St. Jim's shouldered the slim form of Arthur Augustus off the hearthrug, and carefully stirred the blazing coals.

"That's better!" he observed, blowing out his fat cheeks till his face looked like a round cheese. "Hand over the sausages!"

Manners dumped the string of sausages into the frying-pan.

"Not like that!" yelled Fatty Wynn. "They're not pricked. Give us a fork."

With great care each sausage was carefully pricked and turned over into the pan.

A pleasant odour soon filled the study, and even Arthur Augustus seemed to take an interest in the proceedings.

Tap!

"Come in!"

"Hallo, Figgy!"

"Come on, Kerr! Just in time."

The long-legged junior of the New House came in with one long stride. Kerr promptly followed his leader.

"Smells nice!" observed Figgins. "Jolly good of you chaps to send for us."

"I think you've got Fatty to thank for that," said Tom Merry, with a grin. "He came in just at the right moment, and Gussy is standing treat at his suggestion. You must come again, Fatty."

The Falstaff of St. Jim's turned a face-like a tomato towards Tom Merry.

"Phew! Yes, I will. When, to-morrow?"

"To-morrow! Well, not exactly. We'll see when to-morrow comes," replied Tom Merry candidly. "It might be a case next time of bringing your own sausages. What, short of cups! Borrow some from Blake, Manners. I suppose Lowther's got a couple in use, full of some beastly chemical."

"Get out of my way!" shouted Fatty Wynn excitedly. "They're done!"

The Falstaff of St. Jim's, when he was cooking sausages, allowed nothing to interfere with the important task.

"Got the plates ready? Ah, that's fine!"

"Well, there's one thing you can do, Fatty," cried Tom Merry, as he surveyed the pile of beautifully browned sausages. "We shall have to call you the Sausage King."

Fatty Wynn only grunted. The next thing to cooking, in his idea, was eating, and he had already seated himself.

"Pass the bread, Manners!" he shouted. "Come on; don't let them get cold."

"No; I think it would be as well if we started too," said Tom Merry significantly. "It won't do to hang about."

Tea was soon in full progress, and for a time tongues were silent and teeth busy.

Presently Jack Blake pushed his plate away, and looked at the swell of St. Jim's.

"What were you doing in the village, Gussy?" he demanded suddenly.

The swell of St. Jim's delicately chased the last of his sausage round his plate, and appeared to ponder.

"He was standing up for the old coll," said Tom Merry; "although from the way he was doing it, I should say it was a good job we came along. I fancy he'd already booked Kildare to fight the village champion. What's his name?"

"Bill Something," said Manners. "Oh, I know! Forman!"

"Gracious!" exclaimed Jack Blake. "You're having a game. Don't be a silly ass!"

"It's a fact!" said Tom Merry.

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NEXT
THURSDAY.

"THE ST. JIM'S RINKERIES!"

"Jolly serious fact, I should call it!" cried Figgins. "Why, you don't mean to say that Gussy actually coupled their names together?"

The swell of St. Jim's rose with dignity.

"Pway allow me to explain the mattah, deah boys. Tom Mewwy has not done the occasion strict and impartial justice. I was passin'—"

"You've told us that before," interrupted Jack Blake.

"Yes, cut the passing out," suggested Kerr.

"I wufuse to be intahwupted," cried Arthur Augustus, looking round. "I desiah to explain the posish, an' I considah that undah the cires, I am entitiled to youah wespectful silence."

"Hear, hear!"

"Gussy is on his high horse."

"As I was sayin', I was passin', deah boys, an' I ovah-heard Gwegowy say Foahman could thwash anyone within ten miles, and I considah it was wight and pwopah that I should point out his ewwoah and wemonstrate. I meahly stated that Kildare could thwash him."

"You prize ass!" shouted Jack Blake. "Nobody ever said anything about Kildare. Why, I know Bob Gregory is a decent sort. He wouldn't think of such a thing."

The swell of St. Jim's fumbled with his eyeglass, and looked perplexed.

Tom Merry came to his rescue.

"Well, it's all over now," he said. "Gussy was carried away. We made things straight before we came away, so there's no harm done, although those Grammar cads were there part of the time, and had the sauce to hiss. They cleared off before we could spot them."

Jack Blake looked serious.

"It would be jolly awkward if they spread some yarn," he said—"jolly awkward. We should be placed in a false position at once."

"Oh, they can't do anything!" cried Manners. "I believe it must have been Snipe & Co., and they haven't the pluck of a mouse between them."

"Besides, there's nothing they could do," added Monty Lowther. "Frank Monk would about squash them."

"Oh, yes, Monkey's all right!" agreed Jack Blake. "But it was a narrow squeak. It would never have done if, owing to Gussy's impetuous little ways, old Kildare had got his name mixed up with some fighting yarn."

"All right, Jack Blake!" exclaimed Digby. "Don't be a beastly old crow. Gussy's looking about sick of the subject." The leader of Study No. 6 grinned at the swell of St. Jim's.

"Right-ho!" he said. "I know you old image, you, that you didn't mean any harm."

"He had about twenty of the village chaps round him," said Manners. "So if he is a silly ass, he's of the plucky tribe. I believe they would have scragged him, especially if those Grammar cads had egged them on."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

All the juniors looked at Digby in amazement.

The junior pointed to Fatty Wynn.

The Falstaff of St. Jim's had gone fast asleep, his nose within two inches of his plate.

Figgins brought his hand down gently but firmly on the back of the Welsh partner's head.

The plate tilted up, and Fatty woke with a yell and glared round, his little fat nose shining with grease.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Who did that?" he roared.

Figgins looked at the ceiling.

"Silly trick, whoever it was!" snorted Fatty Wynn, whipping out his handkerchief. "Ogh, my dose is all fatty!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

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By
MARTIN CLIFFORD.

"Of course it is!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Who did it?" demanded Fatty Wynn, rubbing his nose till it shone red.
 "Better ask Gussy," suggested Jack Blake.
 The Falstaff of St. Jim's turned round and glared at the swell of St. Jim's.
 "Did you do it?" he cried.
 "I refuse to answer so wide a question."
 "Then you did shove my nose in my plate?"
 Fatty Wynn advanced with a determined expression on his face.

Arthur Augustus retreated in horror.
 "Don't you dare touch me, Fatty!" he cried. "Youah beastly hands are all greasy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "I'll show you," grunted Fatty Wynn lumbering across the study.
 "Here! That'll do!" yelled Jack Blake. "Stop him, somebody!"

Tom Merry stepped in front of the indignant junior.
 "I said ask Gussy!" roared Jack Blake. "Ha, ha, ha! I never said he committed the outrage."

"Oh, rats!" exclaimed Fatty Wynn. "You wait!" he went on, sinking into his chair. "I'll never cook another sausage! I'll—I'll have the gloves on with the lot of you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 Jack Blake jumped to his feet.
 "Good!" he shouted. "So you shall!"

Fatty Wynn opened his mouth to protest, but before he could utter a word, Jack Blake was out of the study.

"Now you've got to go through it," said Tom Merry, with a laugh. "That's the worst of being bad-tempered, Fatty."

Fatty Wynn grunted.
 There was not a better-tempered chap in the whole college; but even a saint might have got angry if he had his nose dabbed on to a greasy plate.

"Clear up!" shouted Tom Merry. "Come on, clear the decks!"

Fatty Wynn refused to move, so Digby, Herries, and Manners lifted him bodily, chair and all, into a corner of the study.

Plates, cups, and saucers disappeared as if by magic, and the table was pushed against the wall.

"Now we're ready!" exclaimed Figgins. "Say, Fatty, mine was the hand that did the deed. Suppose you have the gloves on with me first?"

"Sha'n't!" grunted Fatty Wynn. "It's too beastly hot, besides, I'm quite comfortable. I'll watch you and Blake instead."

"You fat slacker!" cried Manners. "Hallo, here's Blake!"

Jack Blake came in, a set of boxing-gloves under his arm.
 "Here you are, my giddy gladiator!" he cried. "Now you can take us all on one after the other. Only for goodness' sake don't fall on anybody, or there'll be damage done!"

CHAPTER 4.

A Turn with the Gloves.

"FATTY'S thirst for vengeance has died a natural death!" exclaimed Figgins. "He's as quiet as a lamb now."

Jack Blake looked disappointed.
 "Very well, then," he said, "we'll have to get up a row on our own. I'll smack somebody in the eye. I think I'll start on Gussy!"

The swell of St. Jim's leaned his elbow on the mantelpiece, and regarded the leader of Study 6 severely.

"I absolutely refuse to be smacked in the eye, Jack Blake. I considah that a most opprobrious expression, and decidedly vulgar!"

"I know," cried Manners. "One of us can be Bill what's-his-name, and the t'other can be Kildare!"

"Who's going to be which?" inquired Tom Merry.

"You'll be Bill, and Blake can be Kildare. You're bound to get licked, so that'll work out all right."

"Oh, will it?" said Manners warmly. "Don't you be so sure."

"But if you're Bill, you must lose!" declared Tom Merry.

"You can't lick Kildare, you know."

"No, I desay not; but I can make old Blake sit up! I'll take Kildare's part, and he can be Bill."

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 Jack Blake and the others roared with laughter.

Manners was so serious over the matter that Fatty Wynn recovered from his lethargy and looked round inquisitively.

"Isn't it near supper-time?" he queried.

"Supper! No, you—you gorging glutton!" shouted Jack Blake, slipping the gloves on. "Come on, now! Come on!"

The leader of Study 6 pranced about in front of the Falstaff of St. Jim's, but Fatty only blinked. He refused to be drawn.

"I'll have a round, Blake," said Tom Merry. "No slogging, for if I land you in the fireplace, that'll make a row, and we shall have Kildare poking his nose in."

"You land me in the fireplace, indeed!" sniffed Jack Blake, standing in position. "Ready?"

Biff!
 "That's one to Tom Merry!" shouted Lowther, as a straight left landed on Jack Blake's nose. "Bravo!"

Biff!
 Bang!
 Smack!

The pair went at it hammer and tongs.

"Time!" shouted Digby, who had elated himself time-keeper. "Time!"

"Not so bad that lead off of yours," said Jack Blake, with a patronising air. "Shouldn't be surprised if you'll be able to box one of these days."

"Neither should I," retorted Tom Merry drily. "That is, of course, if I get somebody who can use their fists to practise with."

"Oh, that's it, is it, you beauty?" grunted Jack Blake.

"How's that?"

"That" proved to be a failure, for Tom Merry neatly countered Blake's lead off, and got in a light tap on the mark with his right. Then he came on like a whirlwind.

Jack Blake retreated in good order.

"Buck up, Tom!"

"Go it, Blake!"

"That's a good 'un!"

"Nearly got it that time!"

"My eye, but Tom Merry's coming on!"

"So's Blake!"

"Bravo!"

"Wow!"

Tom Merry's left had landed again, and Jack Blake promptly sat on Fatty Wynn's lap.

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 Up went Fatty's heels, and over went the chair backwards.

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Ho, ho, ho!"

"That's done it!" cried Tom Merry. "No more boxing after that clatter, I can see!"

"G-r-r-r! Wow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Jack Blake rolled off the grunting, gasping Fatty, and landed on the floor with another bump.

Fatty Wynn lay on his back and kicked.

The juniors gave him plenty of room.

"Roll him over!" chuckled Tom Merry. "He'll never get up like that. Hallo, Jack Blake, you've got back!"

Jack Blake grinned cheerfully as he rose to his feet.

"You certainly did get home that time, Tom Merry. I must have been dreaming, or my foot slipped on something. Funny how these little things will happen!"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Well, I will admit," he said, "it was a bit lucky. I never expected to bring it off like that, because I was out of my reach."

"I considah Tom Mewwy the best man," observed the swell of St. Jim's. "It was a whipping wight-handah. I couldn't have done it bettah myself."

"I'm off!" interrupted Fatty Wynn. "I'm not used to this kind of thing. Besides, the tuckshop will be shut in a few minutes."

"Sure you won't have a round, Fatty?" inquired Tom Merry. "You can have my gloves if you like."

"Not me!" said the Falstaff of St. Jim's. "I get quite hungry enough as it is, this cold weather. So long!"

"Half a tick, I'm coming, too!" cried Herries. "This bloodthirsty crowd is a bit too much for me, and, besides, I've got to feed Towser."

"Towser's something like Fatty, I'm thinking," said Jack Blake. "Always hungry, especially at the convenient moment. What a blessing it must be to have an appetite! Who's going to have another go?"

"You seem to be in a very slaughtering mood to-night, Blake!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Suppose you have a go at Figgins?"

"Right-ho!"

"You on, Figg?"

"Yes, rather!"

"You'd better look sharp, then," said Tom Merry, "and see if you can't make a noise quietly. What's the matter with you, Gussy?"

"I considah this bout should be on points, deah boy. It's not so wuff, and I will act as wefahwee!"

"Oh!"

Jack Blake's monosyllable was decidedly expressive.

"My word, you'll do the thing in style in a minute," said Manners. "What about seconds, then? Monty and I had

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By

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

NEXT THURSDAY: "THE ST. JIM'S RINKERIES!"

better take office. Shall I get a sponge and some warm water, Blake?"

"You'll want it, Manners, if you're so beastly funny," retorted the leader of Study 6 grimly. "Ready, Figgy?"

"I will give the wequiahed signal!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Shake, deah boys!"

The dear boys shook hands.

"Time!" cried Digby promptly.

The swell of St. Jim's sprang back as Figgins's long arm shot past his nose.

"I must request you to be moah careful, Figgins. I—"

"Can't attend to you now, Gussy. I'm busy!"

Biff!

Bang!

"Bai Jove! This is wippin'! One to you, Jack Blake. One to you, Figgins. Two to Blake. Thwee to Blake. Fouah to Blake. Five to Figgins—"

"What?" roared Jack Blake. "Five to Figgins. What are you talking about? Two, you mean!"

"That's wight, deah boy," said the swell of St. Jim's calmly. "My mistake. You are so beastly wapid, you know."

"Time!" shouted Digby. "Get in your corners!"

Jack Blake promptly sat on the table, and Figgins, panting a little, retired to the coal-scuttle.

"You're a nice sort of ref, Gussy," declared Jack Blake. "Why don't you keep cool? Fancy getting mixed up like that!"

"I assuah you I am pahfectly cool, deah boy," retorted the swell of St. Jim's. "Up to the pwsent the odds are in youah favouah, deah boy. You are gettin' along vewy well, considewin'."

Jack Blake sniffed.

"Considering what?" he demanded.

"Youah size, deah boy," replied Arthur Augustus, who was about half an inch taller than the leader of Study 6.

"Size me hat!" growled Jack Blake.

"As wef," observed the swell of St. Jim's calmly. "I should recommend you to twy infightin'. Figgy's weach is much gweatab, an—"

"Time!"

The friendly rivals sparred again for an opening.

Figgins kept himself well covered, and countered a couple of Jack Blake's lightning leads.

"Bravo!" cried Tom Merry. "That's the style! Oh!"

Smack!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wottah! Wow!"

All eagerness to carry out his duties as referee, Arthur Augustus had leaned forward into the danger zone. A stinging backhand caught him on the nose, and he promptly forgot his exalted position.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The combat stopped, and the principals joined in the general laughter.

"Wottahs!" mumbled the swell of St. Jim's his nose buried in a dainty square of cambric. "Wottahs! I shall refuse to act as wef. Why couldn't you be moah cahful, Figgy?"

"Well, I like that!" exclaimed the leader of the New House. "Just as if it was my fault! I'm awfully sorry, Gussy. But accidents will happen, you know."

"Oh, wats!"

The swell of St. Jim's tenderly touched his nose.

He gave a cry of horror.

"It's—it's swell-swellin'!" he howled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors shouted with laughter.

Arthur Augustus rushed to the mirror. There was a tiny little bump on the left side.

"I must wun!" he cried. "I must bathe it to weduce the swellin'. Supposin' Cousin Ethel were to awwive to-morrow?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"She wouldn't know you, that's a cert!" cried Tom Merry. "Why, you're unrecognisable! Ha, ha, ha!"

The swell of St. Jim's stopped on his way to the door, and stared at Tom Merry's serious face in bewilderment.

"Bai Jove!" he gasped.

Jack Blake turned his back.

"You are wottin'!" cried Arthur Augustus. "You are a set of howlin' wottahs!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ho, ho, ho!"

"The idea of Gussy being unrecognisable!" cried Jack Blake, as the swell of St. Jim's vanished down the corridor. "Ha, ha, ha! It's too rich! The duffer swallowed it at first, too!"

"He evidently isn't aware of his own particular and peculiar style of beauty," chuckled Tom Merry. "Why, nothing less than a steain-roller could knock the stamp of a THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 100.

D'Arcy out of him! Ha, ha, ha! He's the funniest freak I ever struck!"

"You'll excuse me, Tom Merry," cried Figgins, "but I, not you, struck the fatal blow. Goin' on, Blake?"

"Having knocked out the ref, I don't think you'd better," said Tom Merry. "I propose we adjourn for prep. I've got a pile to do."

"By jingo, so have I!" exclaimed Jack Blake. "I'm off!"

Two minutes later the Terrible Three settled down to cram two hours' work into forty minutes.

"That's the worst of fooling!" grumbled Manners, frowning at his exercise-book.

"Oh, well, you can't have your cake and eat it, old son!" observed Monty Lowther sagely.

"Huh!"

After this succinct retort there was peace, and Tom Merry kept his rumpled head over his work until bedtime.

CHAPTER 5.

Larking does not Score.

S WISH!

The following morning proved to be a particularly cold one, and the wind and rain swept round the north side of the Grammar School with a chilling vigour that turned the noses and ears of Snipe, Larking and Carpenter a mottled blue and red.

"B-r-r-r! It's c-c-cold!" chattered Larking miserably. "C-can't we put it off?"

"Put it off!" shouted Snipe, turning his back to the wind, and glaring with watery eyes at his shivering companion. "Of course we can't put it off now!"

"Shouldn't have been such a fool," grunted Carpenter sourly. "If you'd insisted upon calling for the wretched notices."

"D-d-don't you call me a fo-fool!" snapped Larking.

"You be careful," he went on, "or—well, you'll see!"

"Oh, rats!" growled Snipe. "Stop that snivelling talk, and get on!"

"Twenty minutes!" said Carpenter, as the three stole round the corner of the school, and faced the full force of the driven rain.

"Bah! Ten's enough!" replied Snipe. "I suppose, owing to this idiot, we shall have to stand and shiver in that wretched spinney until the wretched, beastly, little worm of a printer's boy comes along."

"Oh, for goodness' sake chuck grumbling!" muttered Carpenter. "I'm just about as sick of the whole business as I am of you!"

The wind carried the latter part of Carpenter's remark away, or Snipe would have retorted anew, and hostilities might have broken forth. As it happened, however, the precious trio frugged along with bent heads, and they arrived at the footpath without further vituperation.

They took shelter beneath a rain-sodden hedge.

"Quarter to eight," said Carpenter, peering across the fields.

"Plenty of time," replied Larking, huddling himself together. "Ugh! Why doesn't it stop raining? I shall catch my death of cold, and it will be all your fault."

"Serve you right if you do!" said Snipe savagely.

"Here, have a cigarette!"

A packet of cigarettes was handed round, and Larking brought out a box of matches.

"Only one," he said.

"Be careful, then!" cried Carpenter. "Here, let me hold my coat open. Idiot! Pig-headed ass!"

Larking had turned surlily away, and struck the only match.

"Don't want your coat!" he had said. "I can— Oh, hang! It's gone out!"

"What did you expect?" cried Snipe savagely, flinging his cigarette away. "I never came across such a fool in all my natural!"

Carpenter's cigarette followed Snipe's.

Larking, careful of future needs, slipped his into his pocket, and spent the next three minutes in shivering disconsolately and answering gibe with taunt.

At last Snipe cut the conversation short by a cautious cry of warning.

"Shut up!" he hissed. "Look!"

"The boy!" exclaimed Carpenter.

"Where? I can't see him!" said Larking.

"Look, and you will!" retorted Snipe. "See him?"

"Oh, he's a long way off yet!"

"Well, and a good job too! You don't want him right under our noses, do you?"

"Better stick that St. Jim's cap on," remarked Carpenter, "and get out and meet him. We can wait here. He won't spot us if you don't let him come too near."

Larking changed his cap.



"We'll all try it on," said Snipe with a grin, "and the one it fits the best goes in. See?"

"Mind," he said, as he departed, "you've got to help if he smells a rat!"

"He will for a certainty when you get near him," muttered Carpenter to himself.

Larking climbed over the stile about ten feet away, and turned on to the footpath running at right-angles to their hiding-place.

Snipe and Carpenter, by bending low, had a clear view of the two figures approaching one another, and were quite invisible themselves.

The printer's boy came along the slushy footpath whistling merrily.

Suddenly he looked up.

A figure blocked his way.

"Hallo, face!" he said, cheerfully. "Don't want all the path, do you?"

"Don't you be cheeky!" snapped Larking. "I'm from St. Jim's!"

The printer's errand boy stared.

"Ho!" he exclaimed.

It happened that he was a town boy, and his tongue was a little sharper for the experience.

"Ho! You are, are you?"

"Yes, I am!" said Larking. "I—I came down to meet you!"

The errand-boy opened his eyes in frank astonishment. So far as he knew, it was a most unusual proceeding for a college boy.

"Thought I'd lose the way?" he inquired.

"No!" said Larking sharply. "Shouldn't care if—"

He broke off. "I want that parcel."

"Wot parcel?"

"The parcel you're taking to the college."

"It's for Master Merry."

"I know that. I've come to meet you. We—we thought you—you might be late."

The printer's boy whistled thoughtfully, and while he did so, he turned his back to the wind and gazed into Larking's face.

"Cold, ain't it?" he observed irrelevantly.

"What's that got to do with it?" snapped Larking peevishly. "Are you going to hand over that parcel, or not?"

The errand boy scratched his ear and blew on his fingers. He wasn't sure what to do. His instinct told him there was something wrong, but he couldn't reason it out, and he

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NEXT THURSDAY: "THE ST. JIM'S RINKERIES!"

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

had a very good object for taking the parcel to the college himself.

Tom Merry always gave him sixpence.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "Ain't seen you before."

"Don't suppose you have!" cried Larking, exasperated by the long scrutiny. "There's something like three hundred fellows at St. Jim's. I'm Digby."

"Digby!" repeated the errand-boy. "Digby!"

"Yes, D-i-g-b-y!" repeated the Grammarian. "In the Fourth, you know! Come on, hand over!"

Still the printer's boy hung back. Satisfied on one point, he still wanted the sixpence.

"Didn't Master Merry give you nothing?" he said.

"Give me nothing?" muttered Larking, in surprise.

"What the dickens do you mean?"

The boy eyed him suspiciously. Perhaps this blue-nosed chap Digby, was trying to do him out of his sixpence.

"Sixpence!" he said.

"Sixpence!" exclaimed Digby. "What for?"

"Why, for me, of course!" replied the boy, in a voice filled with contempt for so dense a personage. "He gave me sixpence the last time, and the time before that, and—"

"Oh, shut up!" cried Larking angrily, fumbling in his trousers pocket. "Here's tuppence!"

"I'll come with you!" said the errand-boy quickly.

Decidedly there was something fishy about this Digby.

Larking scowled.

"Here!" he snapped. "Take this, then!"

He held out a shilling.

The last barrier was down. The errand-boy handed over the parcel, and pocketed the coin.

Larking snatched the bundle of papers, and turned to go without another word. He was cold and angry, and parting with a shilling had proved the last straw.

"Good-morning!" shouted the errand-boy.

There was no reply.

Larking was running for the stile; so, with a shrug, the boy retraced his way to the village.

Once over the stile, Larking turned to see if the errand-boy was watching him, and, finding he was nearly out of sight, he ran along the side of the hedge.

"You have been a time!" exclaimed Snipe. "Still, you've got 'em, that's one good thing. We're perished with cold!"

"I had to give him a shilling!" cried Larking.

"You must have been a ninny to do that!" said Carpenter.

"Come on, let's get back, or we shall be missed."

"What about my shilling?" howled Larking.

"Shilling?"

"Yes, my shilling!"

"Never mind about that now!" cried Snipe, with a grin.

"Let's open the parcel and chuck their beastly stuff for their precious Weekly away. Besides, we can slip the bills into our pockets. Wonder how they look?"

"You can jolly well keep on wondering!" shouted Larking. "What about my shilling?"

"Oh, blow your old shilling!" cried Carpenter. "You gave it to the kid. It's no good bothering us!"

"I had to give it to him!" howled Larking. "I had to, I tell you!"

"Look here," cried Snipe savagely, "drop that, and open the beastly parcel, or we'll jolly well roll you in the ditch and open it ourselves!"

"Rotters!"

"Going to open it?"

"My shilling! I want my—"

"You want, do you?" snarled Snipe, suddenly gripping Larking by the back of the neck. "I've had enough of your pleasant little ways. Here you are, Carpenter! Catch!"

Despite his protest, verbal and physical, the parcel was wrenched from his grasp, and tossed to Carpenter.

"Beasts!" howled the wretched boy, raging with impotence. "I'll make you pay for this, see if I don't! I want my shilling! I want my—"

Larking stopped his plaint all of a sudden, and jumped back in alarm.

Snipe and Carpenter had ripped open the parcel, and the wet grass was strewn with loose sheets of printed matter.

There was no sign of the challenge.

"You—you howling, blinking little idiot!" shouted Snipe.

"Where are they?"

Larking's eyes bulged out of his head.

"I—I—" he commenced weakly.

"You—you—you—" mocked Snipe sneeringly. "So this is what you waste our time for, and then expect us to give you a shilling for this!"

Snipe kicked at the sheets of paper, and made off.

"I'm going!" he snarled. "Coming, Carpenter?"

The pair slouched off together, and after a moment of

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indecision, Larking trailed after them. He bit his nails with vexation, and the tears nearly rose to his eyes as he thought of the wasted shilling.

Truly his cup of bitterness was filled to overflowing, and he had yet to drink it to the dregs.

"Get out of my sight, you bungling worm!" snapped Carpenter, when, as they neared the Grammar School, the wretched Larking crawled alongside.

"You've got a lot to boast about," retorted Larking, stung to some show of spirit. "All you and Snipe are good for is to lie in a ditch and watch while I do the work."

Snipe eyed his rebellious toady with a nasty grin.

"You're a bright youth!" he sneered. "Look at it, Carpenter. Look at it and marvel."

Carpenter turned, and eyed the butt of their pleasantries.

A mystified expression crossed his face.

"Can't you see?" shouted Snipe.

"What?"

"What? Oh, don't be so blind!"

Larking wriggled uneasily, and examined himself with anxious eyes.

"What's the matter?" he gasped.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Suddenly a look of comprehension flashed over Carpenter's face.

"My eye!" he chuckled.

"Take it off, fool!" snapped Snipe.

"What?" cried Larking, in alarm. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, you are a bright youth!" said Edward Snipe, in his best sarcastic tone. "Cap!"

"Cap?"

Larking looked dazed for a moment, and then clapped his hand to his head.

Off came the badge of his deceit in a twinkling, and his little eyes gleamed vengefully.

"Rotter!" he muttered. "Why couldn't you tell me before?"

"There's gratitude!" said Snipe, lifting his eyes. "There's gratitude for you! Here we are at last!"

The three negotiated the turn by the head-master's kitchen garden, and crept into the school by the back door.

They had just time to remove their coats and rub their muddy boots over before the breakfast-bell rang.

Frank Monk crossed the hall as the three entered the breakfast-room.

"Early for those three!" he thought to himself. "They're generally the last down."

During the morning meal at the Grammar School strict silence was observed, and the three adventurers spent their time in thinking.

Snipe schemed.

Carpenter wondered if the captain had noticed anything.

Larking thought of his precious shilling.

CHAPTER 6.

Trapped!

"GOT it!" Snipe muttered this to himself as they all rose from the breakfast-table, and he drew Carpenter aside.

"Look here!" he whispered. "We've got to get those bills. They must be at the printer's."

Carpenter nodded his head.

"Don't see how you're going to manage it," he replied cautiously. "I believe Frank Monk is a bit suspicious too."

"Can't help that," retorted Carpenter. "I dare say it's your evil conscience makes you think Monk's on our trail."

"You've got a nice clean conscience, haven't you?" sneered Carpenter, with a flush of anger.

"Never mind, old chap," said Snipe. "It's our skins we've got to look after just now, so you'd better listen to what I have to say."

Carpenter bent his head, and for some seconds Snipe spoke rapidly.

"You're a knock-out for scheming," observed Carpenter.

"It's not a bad idea if it can be worked."

"It's got to be!" said Snipe.

"You've got to get round Larking."

"Oh, we'll manage that!" exclaimed Snipe easily.

"You'll see."

"How?"

"Simple enough. Lend me a couple of bob."

"Oh!"

Carpenter might have said what he thought, and that is

ANSWERS

that Snipe's schemes and their cost usually depended upon someone else; but he held his peace.

"I've only got eighteenpence."

"That'll do. I'll put the other tanner," said Snipe, with a burst of generosity.

The money changed hands, and the pair sought Larking.

"We must hurry," said Carpenter, as they walked along to the common-room. "There's only a few minutes before class."

The common-room was in the usual state of uproarious excitement, and the two schemers made their way to the fireplace unnoticed.

Larking was alone, huddled up on a form, and looking as miserable as a bald-headed owl.

Snipe sat down beside him.

Larking moved away ostentatiously.

"Half a tick!" said Edward Snipe amiably. "Carpenter and I have been talking things over, and we're sorry we ragged you this morning. It was a bit riling, you know, and"—he went on, in an oily tone—"we want you to take back your bob."

Larking brightened up considerably.

"We'll make it a couple if—"

Snipe paused.

Larking looked suspicious.

"If you'll have the toothache."

"Who are you getting at?" demanded Larking.

"S'h! Not so loud!" whispered Snipe. "We thought out a grand scheme, and we can get our own back on the St. Jim's lot a treat."

"I won't have anything to do with it," muttered Larking. "I've had quite enough as it is."

"What, not for a couple of bob?" Snipe knew his man well. "Not for two shillings?" he repeated.

"Well, what is it?" said Larking, divided between caution and avarice. "Mind, I don't promise anything."

"We don't want you to," declared Snipe. "First of all, you've got a toothache."

"Oh, bosh!"

"It's not bosh; it's a slap-up wheeze. Simple as kiss your hand. Isn't it, Carpenter?"

Carpenter nodded vigorously.

Larking looked more suspicious than ever.

"What's your little game?" he muttered.

"It's just this," said Snipe. "We've got to get those notices by hook or by—"

"Larking!" added Carpenter, with a grin.

"This is serious," remarked Snipe, with a frown. "Understand, Larking?"

"I understand you want me to do your dirty work for you."

"Oh!"

"What about the two bob?"

"You shall have that when you come back."

"Back! From where?"

"The village, of course!"

Larking stared at Snipe in astonishment.

"You're not serious, are you?"

"Of course I am!"

"Well, you must be mad! You know very well I should get scragged if I missed class."

"No, you won't."

Carpenter chuckled.

"Don't you see, fat—Larking," pursued Snipe cautiously, "you've got a toothache."

Larking nodded wearily.

"I shall have a beastly headache in a minute."

"You go to the housekeeper—"

"Yes."

"And get permission to run down to the village to the chemist's. Call at the printer's, and distribute the challenges."

"It might be managed."

"Of course it can!"

"I must have the two bob now."

"Impossible!"

"Very well, then, I can't have a toothache."

"You shall have your two bob directly you come back."

"Rats!"

Larking was determined.

"Better let him have it," whispered Carpenter. "The bell will go for class in a minute, and he'll never dare to try the dodge on with Smith."

"Here you are, then!" said Snipe. "Now cut!"

Larking carefully examined the coins, then he pulled out a rag more resembling a duster than a handkerchief, and held it to his face.

"Don't make too horrible a grimace," cautioned Carpenter, "or you'll frighten the housekeeper into a fit."

"Bunk off!" whispered Snipe. "There's only five minutes before class."

Meaning with pain, Larking got up and made for the door.

"What's the matter with Larking?"

"Mind he don't bite!"

"Don't he look pretty!"

Various remarks were showered upon Larking as he passed through the crowd of boys, but he knew better than to stop. He merely moaned and groaned all the way to the housekeeper's room.

Success attended this ruse, and the kind-hearted House-dame packed him off, with careful instructions not to let the cold get to his poor face.

Once clear of the school, Larking changed his cap again, and started to run. He had no fear of meeting any of the college boys, and he went through the village as brazenly as if he were really Digby.

He entered the little printer's shop with a confident air.

"You forgot to send those notices! I—I met your boy this morning, and—"

"Very sorry, Master Digby; to be sure, I did! I've got them all ready. Shall I send them up now?"

"No; don't trouble," replied the Grammarian airily, and secretly proud of the way he was playing his part. "I'll take them with me!"

"Very good, sir!"

Larking stuck his little chest out.

The printer laid a little roll of paper on the counter.

"Thanks!"

Larking seized the packet with ill-concealed eagerness, and dropped it into his pocket.

"Good-morning!"

"Good-morning, sir!"

The impersonator of Digby skipped out of the shop, an expression of glee on his face.

"Got 'em at last!" he muttered. "Oh!"

Larking stopped, with a sickly look, and stepped hurriedly into a doorway.

Coming towards him was a well-known figure.

It was Mr. Adamson, the maths-master!

Mr. Adamson's duties at the Grammar School did not commence until after eleven o'clock, and he was leisurely walking along with his eyes on the ground.

Larking looked round in despair.

Should he bolt back, or should he put a bold face on, and pass the master? No, he would not risk it. He stuffed the St. Jim's cap into his pocket, and donned his own with lightning speed. Then he whipped out his handkerchief, and gave a groan.

Mr. Adamson looked up abstractedly as Larking shuffled by close to the kerb.

For a moment the Grammarian thought he was going to pass unchallenged.

In this he was mistaken.

"Is that—Larking?" said Mr. Adamson, stopping short.

"Y-yes, sir."

Larking held his face, and groaned.

"What are you doing here?"

"P-please, sir, I—I came to get some stuff—"

"Stuff! What stuff?"

"For my too-tooth, sir!"

"My poor boy! Is it very bad?"

"Awful, sir!" groaned Larking, screwing his face up.

"Dear me! We must see to this for you! You certainly do look rather worn!"

Mr. Adamson peered with kindly glance into Larking's shrinking eyes.

"Were you going to have it out, my boy?"

"Oh, no, no, sir!" gasped Larking, in a hurry. "I was only going to get some stuff from the chemist!"

"H'm! Not much good doing that, my boy! Come with me!"

"But—but, sir—"

"Come with me, Larking!" repeated Mr. Adamson firmly.

"But that—that's not the way, sir! The chemist's shop is—"

"I am perfectly aware of that, my boy!" said the maths-master. "I am going to take you to the dentist!"

Larking jumped.

"Oh—o-oh!" he groaned.

"Poor boy!" exclaimed Mr. Adamson, in a tone of sympathy. "Is it very bad?"

"No—yes, I mean! Oh—o-oh!"

"Never mind; you will have it out in a minute!"

"But—but I don't want—" cried the wretched boy.

"No, no," said the master soothingly; "of course, you do not! I can quite understand your reluctance, but you must be brave. It will soon be over."

"O-o-ver!"

Mr. Adamson crossed the road.

Larking followed with lagging steps.

"Beast!" he muttered. "Beast! What ever shall I do?"

The dentist's house was not far off!

"P-please, sir!"

"Yes?"

"It's—it's much better now, sir!" stuttered Larking. "I don't feel any pain at all scarcely!"

"Ah, but you will again presently, my boy!" replied Mr. Adamson, with unconscious irony.

Larking groaned.

"There, you see; it's coming on again!"

"N-no, it isn't, sir!"

"Why, what are you groaning for, then? Come, come; don't be a coward, Larking! I can assure you that I'm doing you a kindness!"

"Beast!" repeated Larking to himself. "Beast, beast, beast!"

"Hefe we are!"

Mr. Adamson rang the dentist's bell.

Larking trembled.

Wild thoughts floated through his brain. Should he make a bolt for it? Should he—

The door opened.

"Is Mr. Sewell at home?" inquired Mr. Adamson.

"I'll see, sir," replied the maid. "Will you step in?"

For a moment a ray of hope entered Larking's miserable heart. Perhaps, after all, the dentist was out!

His hopes were dashed to the ground.

A cheery, little, fat man met them in the passage.

"Good-morning!" he exclaimed, rubbing his hands.

"One of my pupils," said Mr. Adamson. "Poor boy, he is suffering terribly. I met him, fortunately, and—"

"Oh, yes; to be sure!" interrupted Mr. Sewell. "Kindly step this way! I won't keep you a minute!"

Mr. Adamson laid his hand on Larking's shoulder, and gently urged him into the room.

The trembling boy nearly turned sick with terror at the sight of a suggestive-looking chair with a lot of funny-looking little wheels and knobs.

A basin set by the side of the fearful apparatus brought a groan from his dry lips.

"There, never mind!" said Mr. Adamson, patting his head. "You will thank me for this, Larking! It will soon be over!"

Larking opened his mouth, and groaned again.

"You must be brave!"

"O-o-er! I feel so bad!"

"Sit down, my poor boy!"

"No, no; not there!" gasped Larking, edging away from the operating-chair. "I—I feel much better! It's not aching at all now, sir! I'm sure it isn't!"

"Ah, that's the excitement, my boy!" replied the master. "You are overwrought, and for the moment you don't feel the pain!"

Larking nearly shrieked with exasperation and terror.

The dentist had returned, smiling, as if there was nothing so pleasant in life as to draw a tooth.

Larking shrank back, and covered his face.

Mr. Adamson pushed him forward.

"Come, come, my little man!" murmured the dentist, in a voice that sounded to Larking like the purr of a tiger.

"I sha'n't hurt you! Let me look!"

Larking felt himself drawn gently, almost tenderly, to one side.

He held his hands over his eyes.

The next instant he felt something soft against the back of his legs, and his knees gave way.

He removed his hands with a jerk.

He was in the chair!

The dentist was trotting about, busily engaged, and every now and again Larking caught the glint of brightly-polished steel.

It was horrible!

Suddenly the dentist touched a lever on a tall stand.

A blinding glare of light poured down on the patient, and he stared with fascinated eyes at the round, fat face now bending over him.

"Open your mouth, please!" said a gentle voice.

Larking mechanically obeyed.

Then he felt a hard substance wedged between his jaws.

He tried to shriek, but he was gagged!

"G-g-g-g-gug—g-r-r-r!"

"Oh, yes; very bad!" he said softly. "I think it's the one on the left. Nod your head. No? Well, it must be those two on the right, then. They are badly decayed!"

Larking blinked furiously, and moved his head from side to side as much as he could. He realised now that it meant either one or two.

The dentist looked puzzled.

"It's the one on the left, then?"

"Yes; I recollect he was holding his handkerchief on that side," said Mr. Adamson. "Be brave, my boy!"

Mr. Sewell was prompt in his methods.

Larking tried to shout as he saw a hand come up like a

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snake and hover over his face. Then something cold touched his jaw, and—

"Beautiful!" exclaimed the dentist, with an air of triumph. "Now, my lad, just rinse your mouth out. That's the style! It's all over now. Just a little cotton wool in the cavity, and you'll be all right."

"Is—is it—?" gasped Larking.

"Yes, it's out, my boy!" exclaimed Mr. Adamson. "You don't feel any pain, do you, because if—"

"No, no, sir! It's gone—quite gone," said Larking hurriedly.

"I'm sure you must be grateful to me now," went on the master, taking up his hat.

Larking mumbled something under his breath that sounded anything but a pæan of gratitude, and in his excitement nearly brought out the St. Jim's cap.

The touch of the roll of challenges brought him to his senses, and he shuddered at the bare thought of discovery.

On the step of the dentist's house Mr. Adamson looked at his watch.

"I must leave you now, Larking," he said. "You will return to the school without delay."

With a look of concentrated resentment the boy watched the maths master down the street.

"Beast!" he muttered again. "Beast! Go straight back to the school, will I? We'll see about that."

Ordinarily vindictive, Larking was now positively bilious, and he would have kicked a cat in order to relieve his feelings.

From the dentist's house to the Grammar School his course was an erratic one, but when he did reach the school his expression was one of peace and self-satisfaction.

He had delivered six of the challenges!

CHAPTER 7.

An Amazing Discovery!

"WONDER why that stuff hasn't come from the printer's?" exclaimed Tom Merry, as the Terrible Three paced up and down in the wintry sunshine filtering through the bare branches of the old elms in the quad.

"Ought to have been here this morning," remarked Manners.

"Suppose we run down to the village," suggested Monty Lowther.

"On our bikes?"

"No; over the fields is the best way."

"Right-ho!"

"Tom Mewwy!"

The leader of the Terrible Three turned just as they were going out of the gate.

"What is it?"

Arthur Augustus came up panting.

"I haven't seen the pwoof of my contwibution, Tom Mewwy."

"Neither have I, old son."

"Bai Jove! Where is it?"

"Dunno!"

The swell of St. Jim's rammed his monocle into his eye, and surveyed the three chums indignantly.

"You don't know?"

"No, we don't know."

Arthur Augustus sniffed.

"I considah that you are extwemely cahless," he observed.

"I shall go into the mattah myself."

"We are just going to the printer's."

"I will join you."

"Buck up, then!"

"Pway wait a sec; I will go an' change."

"Go on, then; we'll meet you coming back."

"Wottah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Can't expect us to wait."

"I wefuse to be huwried. It's imposs. for me to appeah in the village in this disweputable attiah."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The swell of St. Jim's looked as neat as a new pin, but his fastidious mind could not conceive it possible to go out without some alteration.

"Are you coming?" demanded Tom Merry, setting off at a great pace.

"Pway wait, deah boy!"

"Rats!"

"You wottah! Pway—"

Arthur Augustus started to run. The Terrible Three were already some distance.

He caught them up as they reached the wicket-gate at the entrance to the right of way to Rylcombe.

"Why this huwwy?"

"Because we want to get there quickly, ass."

By

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

NEXT

"THE ST. JIM'S RINKERIES!"



The little printer rushed round the counter, and for a moment Larking's evil conscience made a bigger coward of him than ever.

"I wefuse to be spoken to in that diswespectful mannah."
 "All right; you know what to do, then."
 "What?"
 "Dunno; ask me?" replied Manners, with a grin.
 After this the swell of St. Jim's marched along in dignified silence.
 Suddenly Tom Merry pointed a finger.
 "What's all that paper over there?"
 "And what in the name of goodness does this mean?" exclaimed Manners, stooping and picking up a damp sheet of paper.
 "Bai Jove!"
 "It's a page of the 'Weekly'!"
 "Well, I'm blessed!"
 Tom Merry tore across the grass, and gave a howl of mingled anger and surprise.
 "Look at this!"
 "My aunt!"
 "What does it mean?"
 "My contwibution!" yelled Arthur Augustus wildly.
 "The wottah!"
 Tom Merry ran his fingers through his curly hair.
 "This beats me!"

"And me!"
 "Can't make it out!"
 "Well, it's no good standing here."
 "Let's collect the stuff."
 The four juniors tenderly gathered up the rain-soddened pages of the maltreated "Weekly."
 There was an angry gleam in Tom Merry's eye when the last sheet had been recovered.
 "Somebody's got to pay for this."
 "Rather!"
 "We'll scrag the bounder, whoever he is."
 "Better go to the village first."
 "Yaas, wathah!"
 "Half a tick!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "See all these footmarks?"
 "Looks as if there had been a struggle," cried Manners.
 "P'raps somebody set on the printer's boy."
 Arthur Augustus gave a shudder and then a sigh of relief as he peered into the ditch.
 For a second he had a dreadful vision of a mutilated body.
 "Well, we'll get along!"
 The four juniors vaulted the stile, and set off at a trot.
 They reached the village in record time.

NEXT
THURSDAY:

"THE ST. JIM'S RINKERIES!"

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 100.
By
MARTIN CLIFFORD.

Close by the smithy they passed Bob Gregory.
 "Hi!" he shouted.
 "Can't stop!" replied Tom Merry, sprinting along.
 Bob scowled after the four.
 He held a crumpled sheet of thin paper in his hand. The word "Challenge" was printed in big type at the top.
 The bell over the door of the Rylcombe printer's tinkled furiously as the four burst into the shop.
 The printer came running out in alarm.

"Master Merry!"
 Tom Merry laid the proofs of the "Weekly" on the counter.

The little printer looked at the pulpy sheets of paper in amazement.

"What—what's this?"
 "The proofs of the 'Weekly,'" said Tom Merry laconically.

"The 'Weekly'?"
 "Yes."

"But—but how did they get like this?"
 "That's just what we've come to see you about."

The printer took off his glasses, and wiped them carefully.
 "I sent them off this morning."

"Who took them?"
 "The boy, as usual."

The four looked at one another.
 "He never brought them to the college!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"We found them under a hedge,"
 The printer passed his hand over his brow.

"I remember now," he cried. "When he came back he told me he had given them to Master Digby."

"Digby?"
 "Impossible!"

"Absurd!"
 "He was in here last night."

"Here last night?"
 Tom Merry gazed at the printer in stupefaction.

"He came last night?"
 "Yes, Master Merry."

"And your boy gave them—the proofs—to him this morning?"

"Yes."
 "Well, I'm blessed!"

"Digby!"
 "Rubbish!"

"I can assure you that I am right, Master Merry," exclaimed the printer. "You don't doubt my word?"

"No, no, of course not!" muttered Tom Merry, in a dazed voice. "It's very strange!"

"Incomprehensible!"
 "He came last night, you say?" cried Manners.

"Yes, with the challenge."
 "Challenge?"

"Challenge?"
 The four repeated the word one after the other.

"Challenge?"
 The printer looked annoyed.

"I said 'Challenge,'" Master Merry.
 "What game is this?"

"Pwepestewous!"
 "Surely he's not gone mad!" whispered Lowther.

"I remember distinctly," went on the printer. "It was after dark when Master Digby came in last evening. He told me his name himself, and I noticed his cap."

"Cap?"
 "Yes, the college cap."

This fresh piece of information threw the four into a further state of astonishment.

"Challenge! Cap!" murmured Tom Merry. "Have you the cap—the challenge, I mean?"

"No, Master Merry. I forgot to send them this morning with the proofs, and Master Digby came for them this morning."

The juniors were speechless. The mystery was too great for words.

"Digby?" cried Tom Merry excitedly. "There must be some horrible mistake. Why, Digby was in class. I saw him this morning."

"So did I!"
 "Yaas, wathah!"

The printer looked alarmed.
 "What can it mean?" he cried.

"I don't know," exclaimed Tom Merry. "It's beyond me. This is some trick."

"Bai Jove, wathah! A twick!"
 "All we can do is to see Digby, anyhow. I don't see much good in it. Oh, hang, let's got back to col!"

The four left the shop.
 The printer gazed after them, muttering to himself, and his blood went cold when he remembered the wording of the challenge.

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He darted to the door.

A scene of confusion met his eyes.

An angry crowd of village boys surrounded the St. Jim's juniors.

"That's them!"

"Let's scrap them!"

"Booh!"

The printer rushed into the heaving throng.

"Stop!" he shouted. "Stop! There's some mistake!"

"Mistake be blowed!" yelled a burly village youth.

"Look at this, master!"

"I tell you it's a mistake!" shouted the printer, as a copy of the challenge was thrust into his face.

"How be that?"

"I don't know!"

The villager turned away with a shrug of his shoulders.

The four juniors were hitting out right and left.

Back-to-back they made a brave stand.

The crowd swarmed round them, and still they came on from every direction.

"Who called us cads!"

"Down with them!"

"Give 'em socks!"

"We'll teach them!"

"Yah! Boo!"

"This is getting a bit too hot!" panted Tom Merry, as a determined rush nearly swamped them. "We shall have to run for it. They're mad."

Biff!

Down went Bob Gregory.

Another took his place.

Arthur Augustus shot out his fist, but as fast as one went down another came up.

"Give the tip to Gussy!" panted Tom Merry, the perspiration running down his face. "It's no good!"

Manners grasped the swell of St. Jim's.

"Scoot!" he yelled.

"I wefuse! I—"

"Come on!" roared Tom Merry. "Charge!"

There was a terrific struggle, then the four juniors broke free.

A howling mob pursued them down the street, and a shower of stones rattled round.

"Run for it!" yelled Tom Merry.

And run they did.

At last the pursuers lagged behind, and the four juniors slowed down.

"Phew!" muttered Tom Merry, mopping his brow.

He held a crumpled ball of paper in his hand.

"This is the cause of the mischief."

Manners, Lowther, and Arthur Augustus forgot their aches and pains, and leaned forward eagerly.

Tom Merry straightened the paper out carefully.

"My hat!" gasped Manners.

"I don't wonder at them getting wild!" exclaimed Lowther.

"Nor I!" cried Tom Merry grimly. "It's enough to make a lamb angry. Look at it!"

Tom Merry held the paper up.

This is it.

CHALLENGE!

The Captain of St. Jim's offers to lick any village cad!

—KILDARE.

"I collared this from Gregory."

"Jolly good job!" cried Manners. "We have got something to work upon, anyhow."

"Who the dickens was Digby?"

"Goodness alone knows."

"It must have been a St. Jim's chap."

"Why?"

"The cap."

The four were very silent after this.

At last they reached St. Jim's.

Jack Blake, Digby, and Herries met them at the gates.

"Hallo!" exclaimed the leader of Study No. 6 in astonishment. "What the pleeceman have you been up to?"

"Look as if they've been in a cyclone," remarked Digby.

"What's the matter with Gussy?"

The swell of St. Jim's surveyed his dishevelled attire with a gasp of dismay.

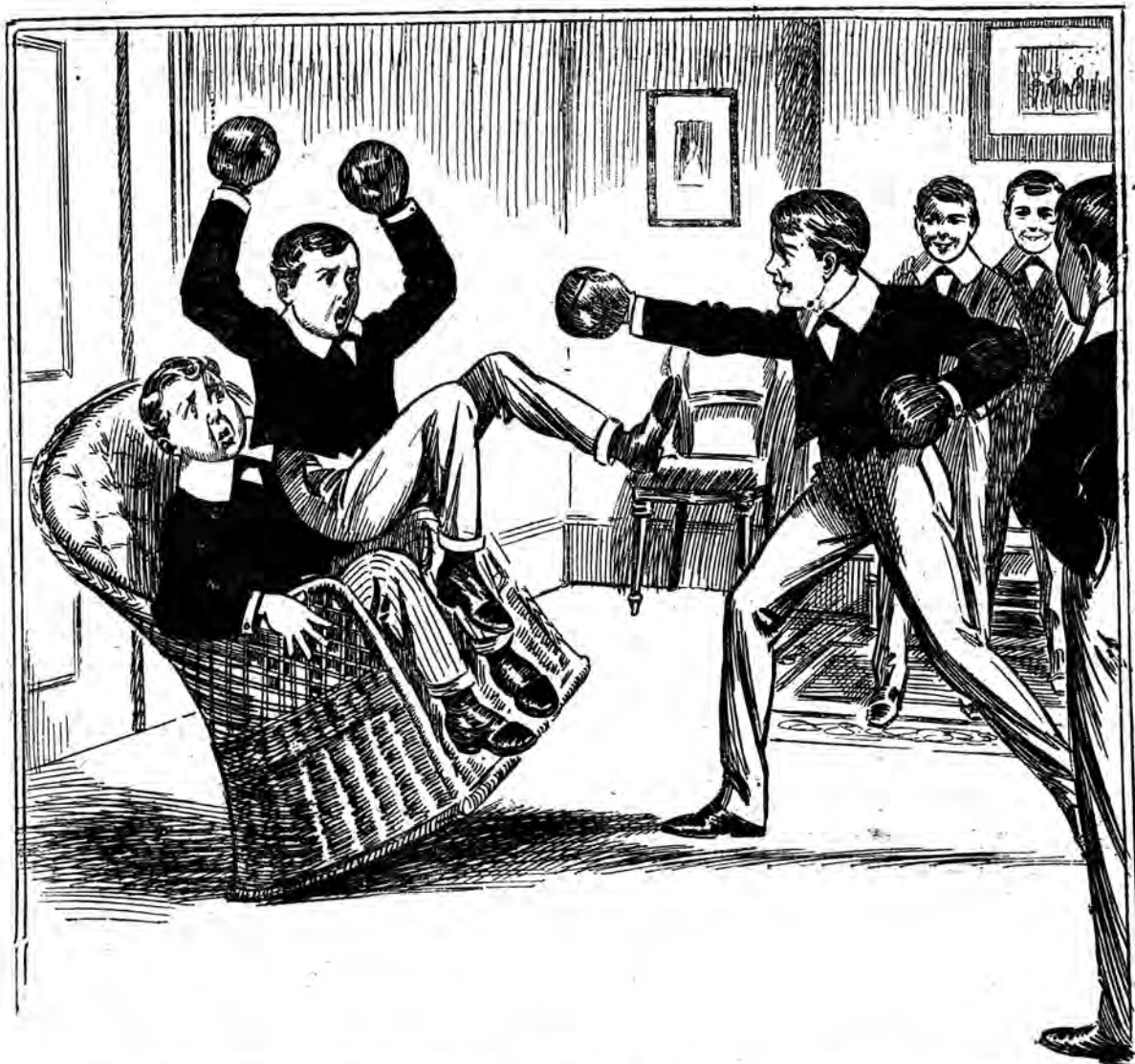
"Bai Jove!" he exclaimed, "I must wun and change."

"Jolly good job he didn't do it before we started," commented Tom Merry. "Now, then, you chaps, look at this and listen."

As soon as Jack Blake & Co. had recovered from the shock of the challenge, the tale was soon told.

Digby raged with wrath.

"It's not a bit of good getting your wool off, old chap."



Tom Merry right handed again, and Jack Blake promptly sat on Fatty Wynne's lap. "Wow!" yelled Fatty, and over went the chair backwards.

said Tom Merry. "We've got to put our backs into this and get to the bottom of it."

"Who can it be?"

Jack Blake put the question mechanically.

Manners gave a shout.

"You remember?"

"What?" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Why, that evening we rescued Gussy."

"Yes."

"Why, then. It's obvious."

"The Gram—"

"That's it. Snipe & Co."

Jack Blake gave a whistle of surprise.

"I believe you've hit it," he said.

"Here comes Figgins & Co. and Skimpole!" exclaimed Digby. "We left Fatty and Skimpole hammering one another over in Figgy's study. I suppose Skimpy's little theory on the noble art did not work out! Look at his nose! Ha, ha, ha!"

The new arrivals were told the news, and in less than half an hour all the Fourth and the Shell were in full possession of the news.

Resentment burned deep in the hearts of the juniors.

"A jape's one thing," commented Jack Blake, "and a dirty, low-down trick's another. We'll call a meeting this evening. Better keep it dark until then."

The juniors fondly imagined that they alone were in the secret, but that afternoon a telegram came from the secretary of the Rylcombe Sports Club, and Kildare went off post-haste on his bicycle.

From the clubz he went to the printer's, and a certain old lady living opposite, and possessing a pair of shrewd eyes, hobbled forth and gave some interesting information about three boys who had spent some time trying on a cap.

It did not take the captain of St. Jim's long to work out the problem, and he went to the Grammar School with the printer's boy.

When Kildare returned to the college he had with him a St. Jim's cap, bearing the initials of a Third-Former.

CHAPTER 8. A Polite Note.

TAP!

Kildare looked up from his book.

A crowd of Fourth-Formers stood three deep in the doorway.

The swell of St. Jim's edged to the front.

"Pway allow me, Tom Mewwy."

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"Shut up!" whispered Tom Merry, in an aside. "Shut up, can't you?"

"I refuse. I—"

"Do you kids mind clearing off?" said the captain of St. Jim's, with dangerous mildness.

"We come—" commenced Tom Merry.

"Quite so. Since you've come, perhaps you will go."

"But—"

Kildare placed his book on the table.

There was a rear movement among the ranks.

Tom Merry decided on a bold move.

"We came about this," he said, advancing, and laying the Grammarians' production down on the table. "We held a meeting this evening, and decided to refer the matter to you."

"We have twiced to decide the mattah," put in the swell of St. Jim's; "an' we wesolved to consult you aftah all."

"That's very kind of you," said the captain calmly.

"But you're rather late," he went on. "I have already settled the question."

Several gasps of several sizes went up.

"But we thought," commenced Tom Merry, "that you didn't know—"

"It is my business to know most things," replied Kildare, with a smile; "and," he went on, picking the challenge up with finger and thumb, and dropping it in the fire, "I have already done much towards placing the affair in its proper light before the village of Rylcombe. An exposure of the trick will appear in the local paper, and although I have not mentioned any names, I fancy that the excitement will die out."

A very subdued crowd of juniors left the captain's study.

Suddenly Tom Merry stopped.

"Just a minute!" he cried. "I want to ask Kildare something."

"You'll get scrag—" commenced Jack Blake; but the leader of the Terrible Three had gone.

"What again!" exclaimed the captain, when Tom Merry appeared in his doorway.

"I just want to ask you a question, please," said Tom Merry.

"Well!"

"Was it the Grammar cads!" inquired Tom Merry eagerly.

Kildare did not reply for a moment.

"The matter is finished with," he said at last; "but I suppose you will ferret it out for yourselves if I don't tell you—"

"Yes, Kildare!" exclaimed Tom Merry eagerly. "What were their names? It must have been the Grammar cads!"

"It was something to do with a bird, a trade, and a jape," said the captain, with a smile. "I'll leave you to—"

"Thanks, Kildare!"

Tom Merry darted back to his study.

The Co.'s were anxiously awaiting him.

"Well," demanded Jack Blake. "So you're got back alive, then!"

"Yes, and—"

"It was S. C. & L."

"Oh!"

"I thought as much!"

"How did you find out?"

"Never you mind!" cried Tom Merry. "I have it on good authority. You can take it as coming from Kildare of St. Jim's."

"We'll go over and rag them."

"The beasts!"

"The rotters!"

"What shall we do?"

"I know!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "We'll give them something to think about."

"What, raid them?"

"No!"

"Scrag them?"

"Pound them to a jelly?"

"No!"

"What then?"

"We'll write them a letter."

"Pah!" exclaimed Jack Blake, in disgust. "That won't do. They'll think we're afraid of them."

"No, they won't," said Tom Merry reflectively. "I remember reading something about Chinese torture, and—"

"Good egg!" interrupted Manners.

"Something to do with boiling oil?" inquired Lowther.

"No; better than that."

"My eye!"

"What is it?"

"Suspense!"

"Suspense!" echoed Jack Blake. "What the dickens do you mean?"

"Something like this," said Tom Merry, taking up his pen and writing rapidly.

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Jack Blake. "Read it out."

Tom Merry grinned.

"The gentlemen of St. Jim's," he commenced, "give warning to the three low-down cads of the Grammar school, and beg to point out that when one or several of the said gentlemen happen to find any of the aforesaid cads within reach, the most disagreeable consequences will follow."

"Signed by—"

"Bravo!"

"Good!"

"We'll all sign it!"

Thirteen signatures were placed at the foot of Tom Merry's letter, and then the paper was carefully folded.

"How shall we address it?"

"The cads of the Grammar School," suggested Jack Blake.

"No, that won't do!"

"The worms, then!"

"The sneaks and bounders!"

"No!"

"I considah it beneath our dig., chaps," observed the swell of St. Jim's, "to wesort to anythin' of the kind. I suggest that the envelope be addressed in the usual mannah!"

"Gussy's right!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "We'll address it to Messrs. Snipe, Carpenter, & Larking."

Jack Blake chuckled.

"I bet they don't show their noses outside the Grammar School for a month!" he cried.

"Bai Jove! They'd bettah not!"

Events proved the leader of Study No. 6 to be correct, for not once during the next few weeks did the juniors of St. Jim's set eyes on the cads of the Grammar School.

When the juniors did meet Messrs. Snipe, Carpenter & Larking there was trouble. But that is another story.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!

"THE ST. JIM'S RINKERIES."

A SPLENDID, EXRTA-LONG COMPLETE TALE OF
TOM MERRY & CO.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

ORDER IN ADVANCE!

PRICE ONE PENNY.

Please tell your Friends about this Story.

A Powerful War Story—By JOHN TREGELLIS.



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.

The two boys are on their way to Luneville, in France, in a wonderful airship, the Condor, invented by John Carfax, a friend of theirs. The combined British and French forces are cornered at Luneville by the Germans, and there are rumours of a great disaster to the allies. By the Condor's aid, however, the battle ends in a great victory for the allies.

Sam and Stephen are then commissioned to reconnoitre the Vosges Mountain district, which is being terrorised by a band of German Uhlans under a Colonel Hunde, known as the Black Hound.

The two young scouts ride into the mountains, and are instrumental in rescuing one of the mountaineers, who has sniped a Uhlan, from the Black Hound's vengeance. They question the man, who tells a terrible tale of the wrongs he has suffered.

(Now go on with the story.)

On the Trail of the Black Hound.

"I don't wonder at you taking to the field on your own, after that," said Stephen, after a glance at the hot-blooded Frenchman, who spoke of his wrongs in a deep, hoarse voice. "I didn't mean to offend you just now. But are you expecting to snipe Colonel Hunde himself?"

"No; that I must not do. He is reserved for one far higher than me," said the mountaineer, touching his soft felt hat reverently. The boys looked at him curiously, wondering what he meant.

"But of his men I have taken my toll," said the man grimly, showing a row of tiny notches on the stock of his gun. "See, these are Uhlans—the Black Hound's pack. Not one ever knew what killed him. But I am talking over much," he added, dropping the gun under his arm abruptly, and lowering his voice. "Let the messieurs forget what I have said. It was the saving of my life by this young carabineer that opened my heart; let's say no more. What news is there, and why do you come into the Vosges country? You'll find it hot enough."

"So we've heard," said Sam. "Do you know of any

place where we can get shelter and stall our horses till we need them again?"

"Pere le Vandois will take your horses, and you, too. He lives hard by."

"All right," said Sam. "Let us go there. We'll make it worth his while," he added, knowing the hillmen were poor, and, therefore, were said to be mean.

"Worth his while!" retorted the guide sharply. "Do not talk of money to Vandois, unless you want a blow for an answer. There is not man, woman nor child in the Vosges who would not give their food and clothes, and the blood in their veins, to help any enemy of the Black Hound and his Uhlans. He—"

There was a sudden rush in the darkness. Several big forms darted out of the wood, and the bridles of both horses were seized. Sam's revolver was in his hand in a moment, but the guide's voice cried a warning.

"Don't fire! Hola, Pere Vandois, you were nearer than I thought! Don't you see it's me—Braconard? These are friends of mine."

The four men who had so suddenly barred the boys' path and seized their bridles, were mountaineers, like the guide, the chief of them a bronzed, alert-looking old man with a wiry grey beard. They released the horses at once.

"You, Braconard!" he exclaimed. "I did not see your face. I thought it was some traitor who had denounced me, and was bringing a German patrol down to burn my house. But they are not Germans, these two—they are Britishers!"

"Yes, Britishers," said Braconard, "and my very good friends, though our acquaintance is very short. I can answer for them, Pere."

He told briefly what had happened at the knoll, and the old mountaineer welcomed the boys warmly.

"They are a great people, the British!" he said. "They have driven the accursed Germans into the sea in their own country, and now we together shall hoist our flags over Berlin! You come from the Scottish general with Du Plessay?"

"Yes; we are the envoys of the brigadier," said Sam. "Our friend here was saying you would put our horses up, as we cannot scout with them in these mountains. But we do not want to bring danger on you—"

"Say no more," said Pere Le Vandois. "You shall stay with me, and not your horses only. With a little care, there need be no danger; nor do I care how much there is. Come with me, and you, Braconard."

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NEXT
TUESDAY.

"THE ST. JIM'S RINKERIES!"

By
MARTIN CLIFFORD.

"I go my own path," said the guide. "I serve one who needs me"—he touched his hat reverently again—"and whom none disobey. Adieu, Britishers, and thanks once more."

He disappeared like a ghost among the trees, and Vandois silently led the way for another half-mile. A strong-looking stone farmhouse, perched on the hillside among the woods, came into view.

"These are my quarters," said the old man, and the boys dismounted, Sam taking stock of the place quickly. It was a snug house, not conspicuous, but giving a good view across the hills; and beyond the next valley was still to be seen the dark castle perched on the spur of the crags, its chief tower showing against the now starlit sky.

"What castle is that?" asked Sam, of his host.

"The Chateau Malmaison," said Le Vandois, lowering his voice a little.

"Who lives there?"

"The Seigneur of Malmaison. The lord of the soil of the most ancient race in France. We of the Northern Vosges are his children," said Le Vandois simply.

Sam knew of the great respect in which some of the few remaining great feudal lords are held in wild parts of France, and he looked at the dark castle curiously.

"Is the seigneur at his home now?" he asked, he scarcely knew why.

The mountaineer's face became stony, and he seemed to shut up like a knife.

"No, he is not there. He is away."

"At the war, perhaps?" asked Sam.

He felt somehow that the old peasant had told him a falsehood—not that it seemed any great matter.

Le Vandois made no answer, but led the way to the stable. The boys saw their horses comfortably settled in rough, loose boxes, and rubbed them down and fed them with their own hands, as was their custom. There were three farm horses in the stable.

The Man in the Wood.

"I will put rough mat cloths over them, the same as my own horses," said Le Vandois, "though there is little fear of any German prying into the stable, for they have been once, and know I have no beasts worth taking for their use. Your mounts will stay in their stalls till you go. And now come into the house."

They passed through the large stone kitchen, which was the living-room of the farmhouse, and into a sort of parlour behind. A peculiarity of this room was that its windows had long ago been broken, and were now bricked and bearded up—an advantage at present, as their host pointed out. There was a fine fire of pine logs on the wide hearth, and an old dame huddled up in an armchair looked up slowly, nodded to the boys, and seemed to drowse off again, though her half-closed eyes were kept fixed on them.

"That is Braconard's mother," whispered Le Vandois to Sam. "The Uhlans turned her adrift when they burned his house. She never speaks. But you will be hungry. I will bring you what fare I have."

In ten minutes the two young scouts, ravenously hungry after their ride, were falling to on a capital meal of omelettes, a savoury stew of mountain hare, and home-baked bread. Pere Le Vandois plied them with his good things, and they were deeply grateful, nor did he ask any questions till they had fed.

After the meal, they gave him the news of the victory at Luneville, and the old mountaineer was overjoyed, his eyes glinting fiercely.

"Well done, Du Plessay!" he cried. "And what a wonder the Condor must be, of whom even we mountaineers have heard so much, and her brave crew! I drink to her," he said, raising his flagon of white wine, "and to the gallant British troops, with Du Plessay's brigade, also! You are attached to them?"

"Yes, at present," said Sam, as was indeed the case; but he thought best to say nothing of their connection with the Condor.

"When are we going to have help, here in the Vosges?" cried Le Vandois. "Can they still send us none?"

"Patience, father; it will not be long now, I hope," said Sam. "My brother and I are sent to reconnoitre the district, and report what is needed. According to the information we can give, you may be sure a force will be sent to drive out Colonel Hunde and his men."

"We have suffered patiently," said the old mountaineer, "for we know the troops are all needed at the front. But, indeed, it has been an evil time since the Black Hound and his men rode over the border two weeks ago. He made his headquarters at St. Dio, and set to work to terrorise the district with his Uhlans."

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NEXT
THURSDAY:

"THE ST. JIM'S RINKERIES!"

MARTIN BY
CLIFFORD.

"How many men has he?"

"About three hundred, two-thirds of them mounted men. And there has been trouble, lieutenant. You are a lieutenant, are you not? Our people, you see are not sheep. They are of a proud and bitter spirit. There are not many left in the mountains, because the younger men were all in the Army Reserve, and were called out. But the remaining ones came into conflict here with the Uhlans, and the Black Hound, in return, burned cottages, wrecked homes, and shot our men, or rode them down on the slightest suspicion, thinking to terrify them into submission. He has not succeeded. There is no Vosges man who would not be cut in pieces rather than yield to a German."

"That's the cause of the Uhlans being shot whenever they give a chance, I suppose?" said Sam. "We have seen three such cases to-day."

"I know nothing about that," replied the old man, lowering his voice.

"You know as much about it as anybody, I fancy," thought Stephen, watching him.

And just then Le Vandois's son, who had been one of the party that stopped the boys, came in with a bundle of logs for the fire. He nodded to Sam and Stephen, treating them as comrades.

"Four more Uhlans to-day," he said with grim zest, "so they say. And all with cold steel. I do not count the one Braconard shot. Four, and that makes—"

"Silence!" said the old man, with a terrible look. "Your tongue is too long, Pierre!"

The son, who was a strong lad of eighteen, shrugged his shoulders.

Sam changed the subject, and proceeded to get all the information he could from Le Vandois about Colonel Hunde and his men.

The old mountaineer was ready enough to answer, and the boys learned a great deal that they wanted to know. How the German commandant ruled the countryside, where his Uhlans rode, how his men were placed at St. Dio, the range of his patrols, and what messengers he sent over the border to the German Alsace. In an hour Sam had got the groundwork of what he had come to learn.

"My best thanks, father!" he said. "With what you have told me, I can get to work and fill in all that I need know in twenty-four hours. Before the dawn my brother and I will start our reconnoitring."

"I would give my left hand rather than any harm should come to you while you are my guests," said the mountaineer. "You seem to me a match for the Uhlans; but take care you do not fall into their hands. The Black Hound is without pity; and I have heard he hates the British even worse than the French. He has a free hand here, you see. And, now, excuse me while I visit the stables, after which, I think, you will wish to retire to rest."

When the old man was out of the room his son, Pierre, who sat in silence, turned to the boys.

"You need not fear to be shot at again, as you tell us you were to-day," he said; "for it is known everywhere now that you are friends."

"Glad to hear it! I hope you won't make any mistake and slip a knife into our backs when we're out to-morrow," said Stephen.

"I?" exclaimed the youth. "I have no hand in it—nor ever will have!"

"I beg your pardon!" said Stephen. "I only thought, from what I've heard, that pretty well everybody hereabouts was potting Germans whenever there was a good chance."

"You are wrong! It is the work of one man—one chief, that is, and two others, I think, who assist him."

"Braconard being one, I suppose?"

"Possibly!" said Pierre, with a shrug. "But the work, at bottom, is one man's work; and every Uhlan killed bears the sign of it."

Sam thought of the way Braconard had stooped over the dead Lancer who had pursued him, and wondered.

"The Black Hound offers 2,000 francs (£80) for information that will put the leader into his hands," added Pierre; "for, do what he will, he cannot discover who it is. The reward was 500 francs first, but it has been raised as victim after victim fell."

"And nobody tries to win it, I suppose?"

"Win it?" said Pierre hotly. "If it were a hundred millions no man in all the Vosges would breathe a word!"

"Although they know?"

"They know!" said Pierre, with a nod. "But do not tell my father that I mentioned the matter, or he will beat me. I only told you to put you on your guard."

"Well, it is no good putting riddles that have no answer,"

said Sam. "However, thank you all the same! And now, as your father's coming back, we'll turn in."

Right glad were the boys to get to their beds that night, and a straw mattress apiece on the floor of an upper room, with a window they could dodge out of if need be, were as good quarters as they desired.

The night was young when they turned in, and for once even Sam slept like the dead. For eight hours neither of them stirred.

It was yet two hours before the dawn when Sam rose, and, glancing at his watch by the light of the waning moon, took a survey of the valley from the window, and woke Stephen.

Two minutes later the boys had dropped from the low window on to the straw and litter below at the base of the house, and then slipped away into the woods, making for St. Dio.

They travelled at their best pace, making the most of the remaining hours of darkness, avoiding all the guarded bridle-paths; and, after a two-mile journey, they came in sight of the outposts of St. Dio, not more than forty minutes after starting.

"I want to find out all I can of the way the town's picketed," said Sam, "to check what Pierre Vandois told me. We must make no mistakes. You can stay behind if you like."

"I'll take the other side, and join you here in two hours' time," said his brother.

"All right! It'll be no great job, getting past the Uhlan outposts."

Sam found it more of a job than he expected, however. Considering there were no troops for the Germans to fear within fifty miles, he expected to find the pickets and sentries rather slack. Instead of that, they were not only extremely vigilant, but absolutely "jumpy," and, though Sam himself got past them by a careful stalk safely enough, one of the sentries squibbed off his rifle and turned out the guard because a stray kid came scuffling past and startled him.

Sam had to lie very close until the mistake was discovered and the sentry well bullied by his subaltern. The young scout was nearly trodden on by one dismounted Uhlan, as he lay in a ditch.

"That mysterious assassin has put the fear of death into 'em all, that's what it is," said Sam to himself. "Nothing like it for keeping a force with their nerves all jagged up on the go. It's pretty near 'Reveille' now."

As Le Vandois had told him, the Uhlan patrols went out some time before daylight, and the night ones came in.

Sam was able to make all the mental notes he wanted, and could judge the strength of the force, the way things were done, and a dozen other necessary matters.

He crept back just as the dawn was lightening the sky, and joined Stephen.

The boy had made a similar excursion on the other side of the town, though not going so near as Sam; and they compared notes together.

Then, as the daylight grew, and the stars paled, they slipped back into the woods.

"So far so good!" said Sam. "It seems to me we sha'n't need to waste much time in the Vosges, and ought to have our report complete, and start back for Du Plessay by to-morrow. Now, I want to watch some of the Lancer patrols at their work, and also see what they are doing about a field-telegraph. They're bound to need one."

There is no need to describe all that the boys did that day. It was all hard work, and dangerous work; but they had reconnoitred the country often enough before, and all the technical military details that Sam took note of and stored up are not necessary to be set down.

The brothers kept together, covering many miles of ground during the day, and halting two hours for rest and food at noon. Once or twice they had to lie very close in cover to avoid German patrols. They had the great advantage, however, that none of the enemy suspected any military scout to be in the district at all. So they played rather a grim game of puss-in-the-corner with the unsuspecting Uhlans all day.

Sam was thoroughly well satisfied with the result; and towards evening they found themselves back again within a mile of Le Vandois's abode, having consumed all the food they had taken with them.

"We can get back to our quarters now," said Sam; "there's nothing more of importance to be learnt. And after a few hours' rest we'll set off to find Du Plessay. This place is an ugly sort of hornet's-nest enough; but a battalion of infantry, with some light horse and a mountain battery, will make pretty short work of the Black Hound if it is done at once. I hope we shall—Gosh! What's that?"

In the Clutch of the Black Hound.

Sam stopped short. They had been stealing cautiously through a little belt of woodland on the hillside, and gazed at a blue-clad arm that stuck up stiffly from a tuft of furze.

The boys drew closer to investigate.

"Another dead Uhlan!" muttered Stephen. "It's a wonder to me they ever go about singly at all."

"Murdered!" said Sam briefly, turning the body over. "The poor beggar hasn't been dead many hours. Probably killed before daybreak this morning. Look! There's the same queer mark on the cheek-bone that I noticed on the one we saw yesterday. I thought it was an accident then."

"Done with the point of a knife after death," muttered Stephen, glancing at the curious mark. "Looks like a spear-head. That's the assassin's trade mark, I suppose. You remember Braconard stooping over that German I shot? S'pose you don't wonder now that I didn't cotton to the chap?"

"Foolish idea; but these wild chaps have strange notions," said Sam. "Personally, if I get shot in this campaign, I don't much care whether the shooter draws a mark on me or not. After seeing and hearing what these Uhlans have been up to among these poor mountain folk, I'm not surprised at anything that happens to them."

"This is Braconard's work, I suppose," said Sam, turning away.

"Braconard is only an underling, according to old Vandois. Wonder who the leader is? Some outlawed peasant, I suppose? Well, let's—"

"I say," muttered Stephen hurriedly, ducking down among the bushes, "keep low; there's a patrol coming along the bridle-path yonder, and they'll pass close by here."

"Hang it! There's a regular big posse of troops coming up not far behind," said Sam, under his breath, stalking quickly and quietly back through the undergrowth. "One of Hunde's chief subordinates must be in charge. This comes of talking over corpses. We ought to have kept a look-out and spotted them long before. Come on! Leg it!"

Another disagreeable surprise followed, however. A party of six Uhlans was returning homewards from the opposite direction, cutting off the boys' retreat for a minute or two. They had to hide among some thick bushes to await the passing of these latter; and meanwhile, the first of the on-coming parties was nearly up to the little wood, and making straight for the place where the boys lay.

Sam's face, as he glanced at them, became graver than Stephen had seen it for many a day, and the elder brother stifled an exclamation.

"Dogs, by George! Here, out of this, Steve, or we're done!"

He led the way through to the next thicket at the imminent risk of being discovered. Stephen hardly understood for the moment, till, glancing back at the approaching men, he saw a horseman with two large houndlike dogs coupled together in a leash.

"Are they after us?" whispered Stephen, with sudden apprehension.

"German army war-dogs! Trained to hunt down any scent. They're brought out now to look for the missing Uhlan—that's a certainty," said Sam, under his breath, pushing onward. "And so it is that they'll find us two, safe as houses, if they strike our track. Ah, they've got it!"

The two hounds were baying and straining at the leash, first with their noses to the ground, and then throwing their heads up and staring into the wood.

"The dogs wind something, Herr Captain!" cried the German in charge of them.

"Slip them, man!" was the answer. "Start them into the wood!"

Away went the two hounds, with a fierce, eager baying, straight in among the trees. They made a quick cast, and the bigger hound of the two caught the scent and followed it at once, galloping on the boys' track without a check.

Both Sam and Stephen, with a thrill of despair, saw it was all up as soon as the dogs were slipped. To outrun them was impossible; besides, to take to the open meant being seen and ridden down at once.

The leading hound checked for a moment as he reached the body of the dead German, and gave a deep bay. Then he sprang forward again on the fresh scent of the fugitives.

Behind him six Uhlans were riding swiftly through the wood, seeing that the dogs were hot on the scent, and all was ready for action.

"Guter Hund!" shouted the Uhlan captain, who was leading. "Old Sachsen has it!"

Sam and Stephen darting into an open clearing, turned at bay in sheer despair. The Uhlans raised a hoarse shout as they sighted their victims, and spurred towards the spot, cheering on the dogs with loud cries.

But the hounds were before them, and the biggest and foremost of the pair, with open jaws, and red, excited eyes, sprang full at Sam's throat.

The young scout had already faced round, revolver in hand, and the pistol spoke just in time. The hound fell back with a choking howl, and Sam turned sharp round to help his brother, who was gripping the throat of the second hound with both hands, in a desperate struggle to keep its fangs from him.

Even as Sam turned, the leading Uhlan came crashing through the bushes; the horse's shoulder struck the young scout with stunning force, and both boys and the hound were knocked spinning. The Uhlan sprang out of the saddle and threw himself upon Stephen, who was trying to scramble to his feet again, and was snatching out his revolver, which he had not yet time to draw.

The big German overpowered the boy, and pinned him down, the other five horsemen arriving the next moment. The dog was called off and secured, and Stephen's arms were rapidly bound to the sides with a leather thong. Sam lay on the grass, silent and still; he had not moved since the horse went over him.

"Sam! Are you killed?" cried Stephen wildly. "Britishers, as I live!" exclaimed the Uhlan captain, staring at his prisoners. "Bind them both fast, lads—the other one as well! Potztausend! What do they do here? Is this the explanation of all these cursed snipings and stabblings?"

"Herr Captain!" cried a voice from further back, when the two troopers had dismounted beside the bush where Sam had first halted in the wood. "Here is the body of Fritz, whom we were looking for!"

The Uhlan officer turned and cantered to the spot. He dismounted from his horse and inspected the dead man.

"Murdered—knifed in the back!" he muttered. "The same mark upon his cheek as all the others. This makes six within the week; but we've got the scoundrels now!"

"Sure enough, sir," said a subaltern, who had ridden up, "for those two young scellums there were hiding quite close by, and the dogs found them at once. Their guilt is clear!"

"Ay, and we can see now why we were all at sea, looking for Vosges mountaineers as the culprits, when it was these English rascals all the time!" said the Uhlan captain, with a savage frown, as he turned to the boys. Sam had partially revived from the stunning shock he had had, greatly to Stephen's relief. Both of them had their arms bound to their sides and were in charge of four troopers.

"So you're brought to book at last, you murdering scoundrels!" said the officer fiercely. "Well, you'll get short shrift, I promise you that! Hanging's too good for you!"

"What do you mean?" said Sam, flushing hotly. "Are we any more murderers than yourselves?"

"None of your insolence!" said the German. "A man who stabs in the dark and runs away is a murderer, and enough of our gallant fellows have fallen victims to your vile methods to hang you ten times over! Bring the prisoners along here!"

"Good heavens, man, you don't suppose it was we who knifed that fellow yonder!" cried Sam. "We never saw him till ten minutes ago; and we are scouts, not franc-tireurs. I am an officer, even as you are, and so is my companion here—"

"You are the scoundrels we have been looking for, and your guilt is clear! Officers forsooth! What corps do you disgrace by being attached to it?"

"We disgrace no one!" said Sam hotly. "And you lie when you call us murderers! We belong to the British forces, and are at present on service for Brigadier Du Plessay and General Stuart-Ogilvie."

"Enough! Be silent!" snapped the Uhlan captain. "Your misdeeds need no more proof than we have seen, and you will get your deserts quickly, and may spare your breath. Make a leading-strap fast to each of them, sergeant, and bring them along at your stirrups!"

"Herr Captain," called a subaltern from the edge of the wood, "Colonel Hunde is coming up the roadway with his staff!"

"Good!" said the captain. "Bring those two young assassins out, and Colonel Hunde can satisfy himself as to their guilt and their fate!"

"It's all up now," muttered Stephen, as they were led along with a long strap apiece fastened to those that bound their arms. "The Black Hound isn't likely to have much mercy on us, Sam. They don't know we're off the Condor, though, nor recognise who we are, that's one thing."

"Small comfort," said Sam, with a sigh. "They've made up their minds we're the ones who've cost them many of their Uhlans and sentries, and that's far worse. It looks black against us, too! That's the man himself, I suppose, on the bay charger. Well, he looks his name."

Colonel Hunde came riding up the forest roadway with his staff of four officers and a large body of Lancers, and a com-

pany of riflemen behind him. He was a square-built, crimson-faced man, with short, jet-black hair and a dark-grey moustache. A pair of fierce, bloodshot eyes gleamed under bold eyebrows, and he fixed them menacingly on the boys.

"Well, captain," he said heartily, "what have you got there? Britishers, it seems!"

"Yes, sir," said the Uhlan officer, saluting. "The murderers we have been looking for, without a doubt!"

He described briefly the finding of the dead man, and the capture of the boys.

"Very satisfactory," said Colonel Hunde grimly. "And one of the dogs is killed, too, you say? Quite enough in itself. We will hang them and be done with it, and the sooner the mountain crows get their meal, the better. Orderlies, forward! Make a couple of nooses, and sling them over the branch of this tree!"

The Traitor.

"Very good, Herr Colonel!" said the Uhlan sergeant briskly, as he received the order, "Two ropes or one?"

"Two. Let the prisoners be strung up together, and we can go on our way. No need to waste time. Hasten!"

"Two ropes here!" said the sergeant to his men. "Quick about it! Make a running noose in each, and sling them over the bough—so!"

The hearts of the boys sank as they saw the preparations made, and that a shameful death awaited them. There was nothing to hope for from Colonel Hunde, it was plain. He showed no more concern over the matter than if he were ordering the death of a couple of dogs, and his cool, matter-of-fact manner struck a chill into them. No pretence of a trial or inquiry was made, and not even a question was asked of the prisoners. The execution was to be hurried through. The ropes were ready in a twinkling.

"It's all up, Sam!" muttered Stephen, under his voice. "I think I would have stood any death but this."

"If I could only have got that report through to Du Plessay first! We've failed him!"

The boys were pulled under the dangling nooses, and just then a party of four Germans came out of the grove, bearing the body of the Uhlan in a rough litter. Colonel Hunde's eye fell on it, and for the first time his grim face changed, and his eyes gleamed with wrath.

"Blitzen!" he said harshly, with a glance at Sam. "I have more than a mind to bind the dead man to your back, and hang him up with you!"

Sam flushed at the grisly suggestion.

"Why?" he said curtly.

"A fitting burden for you to carry out of the world," said Hunde grimly—"you and the other cub. To show these vile hill-men the crime and its punishment—a worthy end for murderers!"

"The word in your teeth!" said Sam hotly. "You have not even put the question to us yet. We did not kill that Lancer; we had never seen him till twenty minutes ago. If you had a soldier's sense, you would see he has been dead many hours. Had we murdered him, we should not have stayed all day by the body, waiting to be caught!"

The men around stared aghast at Sam's daring to beard their colonel in his face.

"They don't call you the Black Hound for nothing," continued Sam scornfully; "but even a hound would have more sense than that!"

"Silence, you whelp!" cried the Uhlan corporal next him, striking Sam heavily across the face with his lance-butt.

The young scout raged in his bonds, but he was helpless. The nooses were settled round the necks of the boys, and two dismounted Uhlans at each rope looked to their colonel for the word of command.

"Are we to hoist now, Herr Colonel?"

"Stay a moment!" said Hunde.

He had been staring curiously at Sam, quite unmoved by the insults the young scout had thrown at him.

"Who are you?" he asked briefly. "What uniform is that?"

"Lieutenant and Sub-Lieutenant Villiers," said Sam as curtly.

"Of what corps?"

"Formerly of the Greyfriars Cadets, and now attached to the 7th Fusiliers," answered Sam; for they had recently been gazetted to the regiment with which they had seen so much service on and off, by the influence of Lord Ripley. Though only a formal appointment, it was to give them the benefit of being members of the regular forces, in case they were again taken prisoners.

Unluckily, the Black Hound, in his den in the Vosges Mountains, cared very little about such distinctions.

"Villiers-Villiers?" he muttered. "I have heard the name!"

It would have been strange if he had not. But as he did not appear to remember in what connection he had heard it, the boys, naturally, did not enlighten him.

"You can hang us; as that's evidently what you're set on!" said Sam bitterly. "You look more like a hangman than a soldier, and have the name of one, too!"

"Shall we beat him first, Herr Colonel?" said the corporal, outraged at this unheard-of insolence to his terrible chief.

But Hünde bent a look on him that stopped the man's tongue and made him shrink back.

"Your opinion is not of the smallest moment," said Hünde nonchalantly to Sam. "I hang whom I choose—and spies always. The—"

"We are scouts, not spies!" said Stephen.

"But as you bear the rank of officers and gentlemen," said the Black Hound, with a sour smile, "I may make an exception in your case, and shoot you. In either case, you will be executed. Harbour no thoughts about that. These murders have to be stopped; and your being in the neighbourhood is quite enough. Corporal—"

A loud, whining outcry interrupted him, coming from a little farther down the path, followed by the oaths of a trooper.

A mud-splashed Uhlan came into sight, riding past his drawn-up comrades, and driving before him a prisoner, whose hands were bound behind him, and were attached to a rope, the other end of which the trooper held.

He drove his captive along with blows of the lance-butt, and was holding across his saddle an old fowling-piece, which he had evidently taken from the man.

"What now?" said Colonel Hünde, looking at him impatiently. "Whom have you got there?"

The prisoner, who was a cringing, pale-faced peasant in a blue blouse, cried for mercy when he found himself brought before the Black Hound. He looked less like a Vosges hillman than like a vineyard-worker from the lowlands.

"One of the murderers, without a doubt, Herr Colonel," said the Uhlan saluting. "I found him skulking in a bush down the valley, with this gun in his hand, and so I brought him along at once."

"Take the nooses off those cubs' necks," said Hünde to his men, "and put one round the throat of this rat instead. I will hang him first, that they may see it done. We will shoot them immediately afterwards, as I believe in upholding the rank of officer. You understand?" he added, turning to Sam. "You will witness the hanging of this animal, and may consider yourselves lucky to escape his fate and be shot. I am a stickler for etiquette, else you would all go up together!"

Sam said nothing. His disgust for the man, even though his own fate was changed for the better, prevented him from speaking. Moreover, though Stephen felt it keenly, Sam cared little whether he was hanged or shot, knowing he had done his duty.

The rat-faced peasant, who had seemed in a state of torpor from sheer fright, suddenly broke into a wild outcry as he was hauled under the tree.

"Spare me, sir!" he cried to Hünde. "I did not do it! I have done no wrong! My family are starving, and I was lying in wait to shoot a roebuck. You will see it is true by my gun, which is loaded with shot, and not with a bullet. Have pity on me!"

"Make haste with the rope!" said Hünde impatiently to his men. "We shall be all the afternoon over this business!"

The noose was settled round the man's neck, and the two Uhlans went to the loose end, ready to pull, when the captive, with a fearful cry, fell on his knees.

"Spare me, colonel," he screamed, "and I will tell you the name of the man you seek—the murderer!"

"Hold a moment, there!" said Hünde quickly to his men. "What's this you say, schellum? The name of the man who is at the head of this business? What is it, then?"

The trembling peasant gulped.

"I have your honour's word to spare my life?"

"Yes, if your statement proves true when tested," said Colonel Hünde, for the first time showing a trace of eagerness.

All around him listened intently; for no one had believed that any Vosges Frenchman would ever make the betrayal. The two young scouts, prisoners though they were, looked at the peasant with disgust.

"And the reward, colonel?" gasped the man, a greedy gleam coming into his eyes as he saw the impression he had made. "The 2,000 francs you offered?"

"It will be enough that I give you your life!" said the

Black Hound grimly. "And woe to you if your information proves false!"

"I am willing you should test it, Monsieur le Colonel. But only one thing I beg—that I may be given a pass over the frontier into Germany afterwards. My life here would not be worth an hour's purchase—"

"Peace, fellow!" interrupted Hünde sharply. "These things are for me to judge! Answer, or you shall be strung up without further parley! Quick, now—the rascal's name!"

The peasant, trembling still more violently, moistened his lips with his tongue.

"It is the Seigneur of Malmaison!"

The announcement fell on all ears with a complete shock. There was a moment's surprised silence, and then a murmur of unbelief.

Sam and Stephen stared at the speaker wonderingly.

Colonel Hünde spurred his horse nearer to the captive.

"It is a falsehood!" he said harshly. "A great noble, of honourable family, could not be guilty of these vile crimes! Do you know the penalty of lying to me, you dog?"

"It is the truth!" whined the peasant eagerly. "I should never have dared tell it had I not been so near to death. You do not know Monseigneur of Malmaison. At the best he was always a hard man. He had an only son, who was taken prisoner by the Prussians in the first week of the war, and I have heard he was shot or hanged as a spy. Since then we all think the monseigneur has been crazy. He and his men have done the deeds you complain of—overpowering sentries, and cutting off Uhlans that ride singly or in twos. He shows pity to none; and on the face of each one he makes the mark of a spear-head, which is the crest of his house."

Colonel Hünde listened without a word; and when the man had finished, turned his gaze towards the dark pile of the castle, whose tower showed sharp and black against the sunset, a league away across the fields.

"Can it be?" he muttered, half to himself. "And yet if this rascal is deceiving me—"

"It is the truth I have told you, colonel!" cried the captive beseechingly. "You will never catch him; but the man you want is the Marquis of Brissac, Seigneur de Malmaison. And yonder is his castle!"

"I shall test it," said Hünde, focussing his glasses on the distant tower.

"Ask your two prisoners there!" exclaimed the peasant, pointing to Sam and Stephen. "They know it is true, as I believe!"

The Black Hound turned his gaze sharply on the two boys, and his brow darkened.

"Is this so?" he said, in a rasping voice. "Does the man speak the truth?"

"I don't know," replied Sam, utterly astounded, as was his brother.

"We neither know anything about it, nor why this man should suppose we do, unless it's to save his own skin. We have never been in the Vosges before, as I told you."

The German colonel turned from him, and for some moments sat silently in his saddle, gazing at the castle, and thinking rapidly.

"Captain Felsheim," he said at last.

"Yes, sir!" said the second-in-command, saluting.

"We will proceed to trap this malefactor at once. Pick me out fifteen of your best-mounted Uhlans and a sergeant."

"Yes, sir."

"We shall ride forthwith to the castle and capture its master. If we wait, his spies will have time to inform him that he is to be trapped. Let the rest of the command return to St. Dio with Major Heinz. You will accompany me. Bring the blue-jacketed rascal as guide. He knows what will happen to him if he fails us!"

"Yes, sir. And the two prisoners?"

"Bring them, too, under escort of a couple of troopers," said the Black Hound, with a grim glance at the boys. "It seems they know more than they have told us. I shall confront them with the Seigneur of Malmaison, and then hang them beside him from his own rafters."

"Very good, sir! Fall in, there, and let us start at once!"

The Seigneur of Malmaison.

The shadows of twilight were falling fast as the cavalcade started down the pine-clad slopes. It was a small force, yet capable of dealing easily with any in that district—smart and highly-trained men.

The Black Hound rode at the head, Captain Felsheim by his side, and they conferred as they went. The French peasant, whining at being forced to accompany them to the dreaded chateau, was led by a Uhlan just behind.—Six

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troopers followed, and then two more in charge of Sam and Stephen, both with their arms still bound, and a rope-lead coupling them together.

"This is a queer go," said Stephen, who could hardly realise how quickly matters had moved. "D'you think that rat of a peasant was telling the truth?"

"Looks like it," growled Sam.

"Then this French lord at the castle is the real culprit after all? Our mountaineer guide yesterday must have been one of his men. He must be a pretty average brute, the seigneur, anyhow."

"Show's how little good that sort of thing does," said Stephen. "If they're so fond of hangin' anyone they catch, out of uniform, they can't be surprised at gettin' a knife or a bullet from behind a bush in return. But I don't see why we're to be hanged with the marquis. He'll speak up an' say we knew nothing about it, I expect, and so—"

"No good counting on that," Sam replied gloomily. "This ruffian Hunde means wiping us off the slate, anyhow. I can see that. He likes a bit of stage management, that's why he's takin' us to the castle. We're done, I'm afraid; but I hope he'll hang that little beast of a French traitor, anyhow!"

"Wonder why he told that lie about us? Well, though this marquis chap is making war like a savage, I wish I could warn him," said Stephen, with a sigh. "My sympathies are with any man who shoots Uhlans, now!" he added savagely. "Pity they could not pot every one in the country!"

It was a bitter business, especially for anyone as proud-spirited as the boys, to be driven like wild animals, roped to the waist, by the rough German troopers. Taunts and gibes were thrown at them by several of the men, out of hearing of the colonel, and some of the insults the brothers had to listen to made the blood boil in their veins.

The misery of the march increased steadily. It was as dark as pitch now the light had fallen. A high wind rose, roaring through the pine-tops, and a thrashing rain drenched the party to the skin, save the two officers, who had waterproof riding-cloaks with them. Hungry, thirsty, and weary, the march seemed like a nightmare to the boys, and they stumbled onwards for hours, as they thought, not knowing or caring where they went.

Presently the raiding-party halted, and the boys, looking up, saw they were at the fringe of a wood, quite close to the Chateau Malmaison itself.

"We're there!" muttered Sam.

"There's no chance of warning the owner. We're bound like cattle. What a forbidding sort of place it is!"

The great black pile of the castle, with a long, embattled wing stretching out along the spur of the rock, and a small turret at each corner, loomed above the dark. Only a single window, on the ground floor, showed a light.

Three of the Uhlans, who had ridden out to scout ahead, returned to their colonel, and in whispered voices reported all clear. The party then dismounted, and leaving two troopers in the wood in charge of the horses, advanced very cautiously towards the great main gates of the castle. Over the gates was a great coat-of-arms in stone, with a marquis's coronet and the spear-head crest—such as had been marked on the cheeks of the slain Uhlans. The lighted window was beside the gates, and appeared to be the gate-keeper's room. Colonel Hunde had learned from the guide that scarcely any servants—two at the outside—were kept at the castle. The boys and their warders, with the rest of the troopers, were left a little way in the background, while Hunde, their captain, and the sergeant, stole cautiously up to the lighted window.

Inside, seated at a bare oak table, sat an old manservant, his head on his hands. The sergeant thrust his carbine through the bars of the window, and cried gruffly:

"Rise, there!"

The man leaped to his feet with a cry, and stood staring in consternation at the visitors. The carbine's muzzle was pointed at his chest.

"Come round and open the gates!" said Colonel Hunde grimly. "Refuse, and you are a dead man. Obey orders, and your life will be spared."

"I will open them at once!" gasped the steward, as he hurried to do so.

The creak and rattle of bolts and bars were heard, and the great iron-bound gates swung open, showing a gloomy courtyard beyond. At a sign from the colonel the other troopers came up, six of them having already guarded the outer exits. The sergeant pointed his carbine again menacingly at the pale-faced old steward's breast.

"Where is the marquis?" said Colonel Hunde harshly.

"He is out, monsieur," quavered the steward.

"The man is lying," said the colonel to Felsheim. "Now, mark, schellum, the first falsehood will earn you a bullet! Where is your master?"

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NEXT THURSDAY: "THE ST. JIM'S RINKERIES!"

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

"I assure you he is out, monsieur," said the old servant, trembling. "He is always out all night, and will return about dawn."

Hunde reflected a moment.

"Like enough," he muttered. Then he turned to his men. "Keep guard over the fellow while we search the house."

Colonel Hunde, his second in command, and half a dozen troopers then took lamps and made a most thorough search through the castle. At least, it was as thorough as they could make it, for the old building was such a honeycomb of rooms, cells, and unexpected passages and galleries, all built in stone, that they did not feel very satisfied. Not so much as a dog was found, however, and the searchers returned to the courtyard.

"The miscreant is out on one of his maulauding expeditions, without a doubt," said the Black Hound savagely. "The only thing to do is to trap him when he returns, before daybreak; I shall stay and wait for him myself. I mean to see this business through. Captain Felsheim, you will return to St. Dio, where you will be needed."

"Very well, sir," said Felsheim, looking disappointed.

"Sergeant, you will take eight of your men and the guide, and wait in the large stone kitchen. Four more will hide by the main gates, and the other three at the back entrance. You will capture the marquis on his return. I shall be with you before then."

He turned to the pale-faced steward.

"Light a fire in the big dining-hall at once, and see it's a good one. What food have you to set before me?"

"Alas, monsieur!" said the servant. "In these days we are very poor at Malmaison. Some collops of ham and a flagon of beer, these are all our larder can provide."

"I must make the best of them," said the Black Hound discontentedly.

"See to it at once, and then supply whatever you can to my men. Take him in charge, sergeant, and see he does his best. You know what to do with him if he gives any trouble."

"Certainly, Herr Colonel!"

"Bring the two British cubs up into the dining-hall; I will keep them under my own eye. It is well you should not be hampered with more prisoners downstairs."

To their surprise, twenty minutes later, the boys were brought up a great flight of stone steps to the first floor, and into a magnificent but gloomy dining-hall.

It was an immense room, with black oak beams and rafters overhead. The walls were panelled in beautifully-carved old oak, some suits of armour stood around, and a large log fire was crackling in an open fireplace big enough to stable a horse in.

By the Black Hound's orders, the two brothers were bound in a couple of heavy, old oak chairs that stood against the farther wall, and when this was done they were certainly helpless enough. An oak table and a chair were drawn near the fireplace by the old steward, and a cloth laid.

The manservant, followed each time by the grim Uhlan sergeant with his ready carbine, returned, and set out a dish of fried slices of ham and a flagon of light, French country beer. The German colonel dismissed the sergeant and steward, and prepared to make himself comfortable.

He unslung his sword and revolver-belt, and placed them on the table within reach. Then he sat down, poured out a large glass of ale, and lifted it towards the boys, with a sardonic sneer before he drank it.

"I believe it is usual to feed condemned criminals before their execution," he said; "but I see no reason for it. And, besides, there is not enough for three. So I shall deny myself the pleasure of your company to the meal."

"Don't give yourself the trouble," said Sam viciously. "We are rather particular as to the company we dine with, and to see you eat would certainly take away any appetite we had."

The Black Hound shot a dangerous glance at them, but took no further notice. No four-legged hound could have gobbled up his food in a more disgusting manner than did Colonel Hunde.

In spite of Sam's remark, it was trying for the boys. They were weary and starving, and the smell of the fried collops was tantalising. The colonel ate enough for two people, finishing the ham, and also the beer. Then he lit a rank Hamburg cigar.

Not a word passed since the first remark. The cigar was smoked out at last, and Hunde threw the stub into the fire, and sat thinking.

The heavy meal and the beer, after the lonely, rough march, had made him drowsy. He did not actually go to sleep, but his head drooped, and he dozed gently in his chair.

The silence of the room was oppressive, save for the hiss of the fire and the colonel's heavy breathing. It was strange

that no sound came from below, though the Uhlans in the kitchen were probably making merry, but the stone walls and floor, the latter carpeted with matting, shut out all sound.

"I'd give something for a carbine and one free hand," muttered Stephen. "I'd shoot the fellow where he sits, like the dog he is! I'm sorry I ever said a word against the Seigneur of Malmaison, and the poor beggar will be hanged from his own roof-tree by to-morrow morning!"

Sam made no reply. The situation was gloomy enough, but it was better than that killing march through the wind and rain. The minutes dragged by, but still the Black Hound dozed.

Stephen, looking up suddenly, blinked his eyes, as if he wondered whether they were playing him a trick.

What was it he saw? Both boys, petrified, gazed at the wall behind the colonel's chair. The black oak panels seemed to move, without a sound, disclosing a dark cavity.

A face peered out—a grim, bronzed face, fierce as a falcon's, with finely-chiselled features, and a large, hooked nose like the beak of some bird of prey. A peaked, black beard was on the chin. Two fierce eyes glanced round the room and at the dozing German, then met those of the boys, but gave no sign.

The owner of the face stepped noiselessly out of the cavity in the wall—a man of giant stature, tall, very powerfully built, and of aristocratic bearing, clad in riding costume. He gave one curious glance at the colonel, and, reaching out a long arm, took the sword and revolver from the table without a sound. He passed them behind him, and a hand outstretched from the cavity in the wall took them, and they disappeared. Then the panel slid quietly into its place, covering all traces of the secret entrance.

Sam and Stephen watched with starting eyes, wondering what was going to happen. The gigantic stranger, without a glance towards them, stepped round to the front of the German's chair, a long revolver in his fist.

Colonel Hundt looked up with a startled gasp, and his eyes met the steely, gleaming orbs of the man in front of him.

Monseigneur Tells a Story.

"Welcome to Malmaison," said the huge stranger, in quiet, courteous tones, though his eyes shone with malevolence. "You were expecting me, I think? No, do not trouble to rise."

The German reached out hurriedly for his weapons, and, finding them gone, gave a cry of dismay, and sprang at the speaker. The result was surprising. Hundt was a powerful man, but the stranger with one hand flung him back into the chair with a crash that knocked the German's head against the back of the chair, and half stunned him.

"I beg of you to remain seated," said his aggressor, in the same smooth tones. "You need not trouble yourself to call for your Uhlans. Dead men hear little, as doubtless you know. This is a solid old house, and through the thick walls it is curious how little one hears of what goes on in the other rooms. Your men have met with the fate I reserve for all Uhlans, and you have only yourself to consider."

The Uhlans seemed utterly dazed. He could only stare helplessly at the stranger, and at the revolver which held him at his captor's mercy. Sam and Stephen looked on, quite as surprised as the colonel.

"You appear a little surprised," said the tall man politely, though his eyes glared like a tiger's at the German. "This is a very old house, and has puzzled others before you. You may be interested to know that fifty men were watching you at supper. By the way, will you introduce yourself to me?"

The Uhlans found his tongue, but he kept his eyes fixed on the revolver.

"I am Colonel Hundt, of the 40th Uhlans."

"Ah, the Black Hound, men call you. I should not be so rude as to give you the name myself, but no bound is a match for the grey wolf, as you will find. Do you know who I am?"

"The Marquis de Brissac," said Hundt, with dry lips. The man's eyes fascinated him strangely, and he looked from them to the long finger resting on the pistol's trigger.

"Yes," said the interrogator, "the Seigneur of Malmaison. You are my prisoner. You have prisoners of your own yonder in the chairs, I see—or, rather, had. I will attend to them presently, but for the moment I have pressing business with you, colonel. Down, I tell you!"

The German made a sudden desperate spring, hoping to turn the revolver aside and grapple with his enemy. For a moment the two men were locked together, but Hundt, though strong, was like a baby in the grip of the gigantic Frenchman. He was hurled back into his chair with a crash, and lay there, bruised and gasping.

"That is better," said the marquis, who had not turned a hair. "How has my servant treated you? Well, I hope?" he added, picking up the flask and glancing at it. "What

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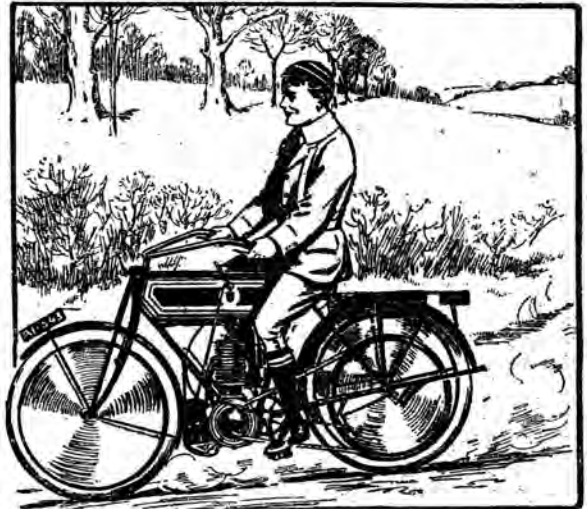
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is this—beer? And a dish greasy with ham? My deepest apologies, Colonel Hunde. What in the world must you think of Malmaison after that? We must do better."

He rang the bell by the fireplace, and instantly the old steward appeared.

"Bring Tokay of 1840," said the marquis.

"Yes, monseigneur," replied the servant briskly, and in a very short time he arrived with a bottle of rare old wine—such wine as is beyond the reach of emperors—and a fine crystal goblet.

The Uhlan commander refused the food, but he seized the glass and gulped the wine down, and it seemed to bring the blood back to his face, which had grown strangely pale.

"Drink, colonel," said monseigneur.

Monseigneur filled the goblet again, and set the bottle down.

"My goodness!" said Stephen, under his breath. "The Black Hound has met his match! What in the world is going to happen?"

"What are you going to do?" said Hunde hoarsely.

"I am glad you have found your voice," said monseigneur.

"Those Uhlans of yours are very dull fellows. When I have dealings with them they never say anything except 'Have mercy on me!' or some foolish remark of that sort. But you are an officer, of course. I am glad you like my wine, by the way. Do not stint yourself; I have plenty, and it is a wine I have served to kings."

He filled the goblet afresh.

"And now, colonel," he said, in the same cool, mocking voice, "I shall crave leave to tell you a story while you drink. It is a short but sad little history of my son Paul—my only child."

The Uhlan commander stared at his huge captor with growing horror. Hunde seemed incapable of resisting further.

Coals of Fire.

"Paul was a subaltern in the Cuirassiers," said the seigneur. "They never had a smarter officer. He was straight, and strong, and fearless, as a Brissac of Malmaison should be. On the second day of the war, during the Cuirassiers' charge at Branville, his horse was shot under him, and he fell into the hands of the Germans."

"Of that no soldier would complain—it is the fortune of war. Paul, with other prisoners, was sent to Strasburg. There the officer who commanded the detachment treated Paul as one gentleman should treat another in distress. He gave him a meal, and the best wine he could command, as I have done to you, have I not? That is one item of the account squared, colonel, but I am still indebted for other things."

The Uhlan commander shrank still more, as the huge Frenchman smiled sardonically while he said the words.

"All might have gone well, but my son was then sent to Stuttgart, where the officer placed in charge of the prisoners was of a different type. He was a brute and a bully, and his chief amusement was in taunting and jeering at the unlucky captives in his care. From the first he singled out my son to be his butt, and when Paul answered back proudly to some insult, the scoundrel struck him savagely in the face—thus!"

The Frenchman's huge fist crashed upon the Black Hound's temple, and the German sank back in the chair, his forehead bleeding profusely where the knuckles had cut it. He made no sound, but covered his face with his hands.

"The ruffian laughed at the sorry appearance my son made, with his face bruised and bleeding. You are rather an amusing sight yourself, colonel, just now, and it is a good thing none of your young officers can see you."

"To get on with the tale. Another officer that same evening, seeing my boy's plight, took pity on him, and gave him a glass of wine, for he was in a very low condition—Pray try another goblet of the Tokay, colonel."

Hunde obeyed, and tried eagerly to drink the reviving fluid. He took the goblet, but his hand shook so that most of the wine was spilled abroad.

"Your hand is a little unsteady, colonel. Paul was also much upset by the treatment he received. The villain of an officer—he was not a Uhlan, by the way, but an infantry captain—vented all his spite upon Paul, who had too much pride to save himself by cringing to the man. So, trying to break the boy's spirit, the scoundrel beat, and struck, and kicked him—treated him like this, and this, and this!"

The Black Hound gasped and writhed, but the savage shower of blows still rained down, and he collected himself, only to be flung bruised and bleeding into his chair.

"My word, but it's awful!" muttered Sam, and with a change of feeling he almost pitied the wretched Uhlan colonel, who was sobbing aloud in his helplessness and defeat.

"I observe you are weeping," said the terrible Frenchman, as courteously as ever. "Paul, too, often shed tears of shame while he was in the power of this man. One day,

seeing his face was badly bruised, a kindly Prussian orderly offered to bathe it for him. I have a bowl of water here on the table, so pray allow me—"

"Let me alone, you brute!" groaned Hunde. "I want none of your sham pity!"

"It is not sham, pardon me," said monseigneur. "I am taking the events as they come, and if they are distasteful to you, the fault is not mine. The account is not settled yet."

"To resume the story, however. Three days later, Paul and a brother prisoner—from whom I had this narrative—effected their escape. Of all that they suffered on the way there is no need to tell you; but they had the good luck to obtain two suits of clothes that had belonged to German artisans, and, disguised in these, they got nearly as far as Metz, and soon would have been safe in France. As ill-luck would have it, when they thought their danger was over, a party of Uhlans came upon them, and they were recaptured. You can imagine their bitter disappointment, Colonel Hunde. So near to safety, yet defeated."

Monseigneur rang sharply thrice at the bell, and four grim-looking mountaineers strode into the room, the foremost of them carrying a coil of rope slung over his arm.

"I have no Uhlans," said the marquis; "these must take their place. The officer commanding the patrol, colonel, finding his prisoners were French soldiers in disguise, treated them as Uhlans do, and without trial or question, proceeded to hang them as spies. Jacques, throw your rope over the beam."

The other mountaineers at a sign from the marquis pulled the Black Hound from his chair, and brought him under the rope that had been slung over the black rafter. The noose was settled round Hunde's neck. He knew it was useless to resist, or to ask mercy of the pitiless man before him. The Uhlan colonel braced himself up, and faced his terrible captor with what defiance he could.

"You are now upon the very brink of death," said monseigneur. "You do well to pray, as I see that you are doing. My son Paul stood even as you stand now, and he, too, prayed. At that moment it so chanced that the German general in charge of the column arrived, and, hearing Paul praying, he was moved to pity. He sent the Uhlans back, and, learning from my boy that he was the only heir of an ancient race, and the son of a loving father, he flung off the rope as I fling off this, and embraced him, as I embrace you, and bade him go free, as I now give you leave to do. Go forth from Malmaison, Colonel Hunde, and may the blessings of this German general, though they could not save my boy from the fever that killed him, go with you."

Without a word, dazed, bewildered, bleeding, and half-blinded, the Black Hound stumbled forth from the Chateau Malmaison, and out into the night.

Then, striding over to where the boys sat, helpless and amazed, the marquis drew a hunting-knife from his belt and cut them free.

The Avengers.

As the hunting-knife snicked through the cords, Sam and his brother rose to their feet, stiff, dazed, and almost wondering if they had not been dreaming.

They looked at the seigneur, and he bowed low before them with a stately politeness, as though he was receiving guests of honour at a house-party.

"I have to offer you a thousand apologies, gentlemen," he said, "for letting you remain in this position so long. I must have seemed to you very unmannerly; but the truth is, my business with the person who has just gone out allowed of no delay."

"Don't apologise, marquis," said Sam. "We owe it to you that we are not swinging at the end of a rope."

"We were better tied up, sir, while that was going on," said Stephen, looking at the seigneur with as much awe as he ever felt. "May we congratulate you on the way you dealt with that Uhlan? The fact is, we were expecting our death at his hands, and didn't expect to see another sunrise."

"I am charmed to have your approval," replied the marquis. "Pray consider my house as your own, and shortly I hope to offer you such poor hospitality as I have. I beg you to excuse me now, for a few minutes only, while I rid the house of certain carrion that embarrasses it."

The mountaineer with the rope, at a sign from the seigneur, had already departed silently, and Malmaison, with another boy, withdrew, and left the boys to themselves.

They glanced at each other, and then looked round the room—the remains of the supper on the table, and the great, crackling fire.

"It's real," said Stephen; "but, hang me, if I don't have to pinch myself to make sure I am not dreaming. Did you ever hear of anything like it?"

"It was rather awful," said Sam, drawing a long breath.

"I'd rather be stuck up and shot out of hand than go through what that colonel did. I made sure they were going to hang him, on top of it all, too."

"Serve the butchering brute right," was all Stephen answered. "Well, the seigneur's shown himself more than a match for the Black Hound."

"He's a man I'd rather have for a friend than an enemy," said Sam. "Never saw anybody with such a look about his eyes. And that hulking German was like a baby in his hands. My word! but when you think how the Germans treated his son, you can't wonder at it."

"Hunde is one of the same kidney as those who ill-treated the young lieutenant. This is a kind of war that's new to me," returned Stephen, "and the Uhlans that brought us here who were left downstairs—"

"Overpowered by Malmaison's men, and wiped out," said Sam briefly. "It's strange we never heard a sound of it; but these stone floors are thick, as the marquis said. I wonder what's to be the end of this?"

"I'm jolly near tuckered out myself," said Stephen, for hunger, thirst, and the long strain he had undergone since the previous morning were telling even on his tough constitution.

Just then the marquis returned, and, seeing the boy's white, drawn face, caught him by the arm in time to save him from collapsing on the floor from sheer exhaustion.

"You have gone through much, I can see," said monseigneur, who, in spite of his grim appearance, now spoke as tenderly as a woman. "Sit here in the chair, young sir, and take a glass of this wine. It will pull you together. Clean glasses here, Jean!"

It was no habit of the boys to take strong liquors at any time, and to this they owed much of their toughness; but they needed the restorative badly now, and each took a glass of the Tokay from the marquis's white hand.

The wonderful old vintage, tasting soft and mellow as liquid-gold, set the blood coursing in their veins again, and revived them wonderfully.

"You need food and rest, of course," said monseigneur. "Did that Uhlans person to whom I told my little story offer you any? The unmanly dog! You mean that he devoured his meal in front of you, while you were starving. I regret now that I did not hang him."

The marquis rang the bell again, and the old man appeared in a twinkling, as sedate as ever.

"Supper of the best," ordered monseigneur.

Two other servants in livery appeared also, the remains of Colonel Hunde's meal disappeared, and with wonderful rapidity and silence a sumptuous repast was served.

The coarse cloth on which Hunde's meal had been spread was gone, one of the finest snowy-linen taking its place, and crystal glasses and beautiful old silver were set out.

The boys were conducted to two rooms adjoining, where they enjoyed a luxury that had seldom come their way during the campaign—a hot bath.

"My word! We've fallen on our feet this time," said Stephen, as he rejoined his brother, and both of them, well-cleaned and groomed, went back to the dining-hall, where their host awaited them, and the meal was served.

It was a dream of luxury to the two boys, who had so often drunk ditch-water, and dined off bully beef eaten out of its native tin.

There was steaming hot soup, crimped grayling from the mountain streams. Sweetbreads stewed in champagne, followed by a dish of spiced venison, and concluded with cream-frosted tartlets and rare fruits.

The boys, who had thought from what the butler had told Hunde that the marquis was poor, were amazed.

They did not allow their amazement to interfere with their appetites, however.

Monseigneur made a charming host. Nor would anyone have suspected from his manner how grim a scene had passed in that banqueting-hall a few minutes before.

The brothers were soon themselves again under the influence of the food and warmth and rest; and the marquis, with true courtesy, refrained from asking them any questions until they felt more fit to answer.

In truth, the curiosity of the boys was greater than that of monseigneur; but they did not care to ask him anything either till he began. For all his courtesy, there was an air of danger about him.

"I have made one very unpleasant acquaintance this evening," said the marquis, sitting back in his chair and lighting a cigar. "I am rewarded in that by now meeting two very pleasant ones. May I be honoured by knowing your names?"

"We are only a couple of scouts, marquis," said Sam, smiling—"Lieutenant and Sub-lieutenant Villiers, late of the Greyfriars cadets."

"Indeed?" said monseigneur, with another bow, and a look of pleased surprise. "I need no further introduction

than those names. I have long known them, though this is the first time we meet. Who has not heard of your exploits during the German occupation of England? And now you are with this brave Monsieur Carfax, of the aeroplane, are you not?"

"Yes, we are lucky enough to form two of her crew," said Sam, "although I don't know what good we are to her, except that Mr. Carfax seems to like to have us handy. We didn't do him much credit by falling into the hands of the Black Hound, though."

"How did that happen? I have heard of it, but not the details," said the marquis.

Sam gave him a brief complete account of their ride into the Vosges, and the disaster which had overtaken them. Monseigneur listened without moving a muscle; but from time to time his fierce eyes glowed like the red-hot end of his cigar.

"So," he said, "I owe you an apology, you see. It seems that my little affairs in the woods have caused you a good deal of trouble."

"All's well that ends well," said Sam. "We certainly came very near to being hanged for them, though."

"A good many Uhlans have gone the appointed road with bullet and knife since my son Paul died," said Malmaison. "It may be open to some slight misunderstanding when they are found. I fear some of these mountain wolves of mine, though so attached to me, are not so particular in their methods as I should be myself. But what would you have? *La guerre, c'est la guerre!*"

"They make pretty sure of their men, if your follower whom we met yesterday is a sample," Sam replied.

"It is possible. The Uhlans, you see, also make very sure of them. Not that I have lost any men. But for myself I make a point of giving each enemy his chance when I fall across him."

"I'd have wagered on that," exclaimed Sam. "I felt sure you were too good a sportsman to—to take advantage of a man—"

"I trust you did not imagine anything else," said Malmaison. "A gentleman cannot be an assassin. I cannot say, however, that any German I have met with has been so fortunate as to survive the meeting."

"I should think not!" muttered Sam, glancing at Malmaison's gigantic frame, and remembering how he had dealt with Colonel Hunde. "I should be sorry to come to grips with you, marquis."

"Will—will your men stop the German colonel before he gets to St. Dio?" asked Stephen hesitatingly.

"No, of course not," returned Malmaison, raising his eyebrows.

"When I bid a man go free I have given my word. He goes free."

"I wondered you did not keep him," murmured Stephen.

"My boy Paul was released," said the marquis quietly, "by a German general. It was the fever that afterwards attacked my son, in his weakened state, that killed him. I merely kept to the truth."

"Yes, sir," said Sam, after a pause; "but it's hardly to be expected that a fever will attack the Black Hound between this and St. Dio before he reaches his troops. In that case, he may come back here."

"Of course he will come back!" said monseigneur quietly. "He and all his command."

"But surely the Chateau Malmaison cannot hold out against a force of hundreds of troops," said Stephen, in surprise, "with guns, perhaps, and modern appliances?"

"That is also true," said the marquis imperturbably. "Resistance could not succeed—at least, I shall not attempt it. There is no longer any reason, now my vow is fulfilled."

"Then you'll surrender the place, marquis?" asked Stephen, wondering at such a change of front.

"Sir," said the marquis, his eyes flashing at Stephen, as he half rose from his chair, "you understand very little. No Malmaison has surrendered to man or devil since the days of Charlemagne!"

"I beg your pardon!" said Stephen, feeling much abashed. "I didn't mean to—"

"Say no more!" said monseigneur, with a wave of his hand. "You will comprehend, I think, before many hours are past. By the way," he continued, turning to Sam, "whither will your next journey be?"

"We must get back to Brigadier du Plessay," replied Sam, "after as short a rest as we can do with."

"You said you were reporting to him the state of the country, and the German forces?"

"Yes, so that he may know what troops he need send to drive Hunde's men out. He cannot spare very many."

"There will not be need of a great many, though it will require skill and courage," said the marquis. "I can tell you many things you want to know that may help."

Malmaison at once supplied Sam with some most valuable

information, which was thankfully received and noted down. Knowing every foot of the mountains as he did, the seigneur gave Sam many points which the young scout, in so short a time, could not possibly have discovered for himself. They consulted together for the best part of an hour, Sam jotting the facts down in his note-book, and at the end of it his knowledge was such as a general might be glad to give a small fortune for.

"I will send you my best guide," said the marquis, rising. "He shall follow after you, and will meet your advance guard at the bridge called Pont d'Ours. You will be returning yourself with the troops that come to smoke out Hunde's men, no doubt?"

"I don't know," said Sam. "It will depend on orders; but I hope we shall meet again, marquis, if we do."

Monseigneur shook his head with a grim smile. "There may be no Seigneur of Malmaison by that time," he said; "but you are too tired to read riddles. Your brother also has succumbed already," he added, for Stephen had long since lapsed into slumber, with his head on his arms, leaning upon the table.

The marquis stood gazing at him for several moments. "A fine lad!" he murmured. "Just what Paul was at his age." A spasm of pain passed across Malmaison's features. "But come! I will show you to your room. You would prefer an apartment together, of course. Sleep soundly while you may, for there is no saying what the morrow will bring." Stephen was awakened sufficiently to walk to the room to which Malmaison led them—a fine, but gloomy, apartment of very large size, with two great oak beds in it, but of the room or its appearance the brothers were too weary to take any notice. They threw themselves on the coverlets just as they were, and fell into a deep slumber.

The End of Malmaison.

The first thing Sam was aware of next morning was the marquis himself standing by his bedside, with a smile of greeting, a heavy riding-whip in his hand. A watery sun was sending its rays through the tall windows.

"You have slept well," said monseigneur; "a good nine hours. Will you rise and breakfast with me, or would you prefer another nap? The place will be rather noisy shortly, I fear."

"We're ready at once, sir," said Sam, jumping to the floor, as his brother awoke, and did the same.

"Is all well?"

"Very much so!"

"There will be no attack, then?"

"Do not hurry yourself," said monseigneur, strolling to the door; "there is ample time. Jean shall bring you all you want."

The boys had their morning tub, and dressed again rapidly, both feeling immensely refreshed.

"What did our host mean by saying it would be noisy, I wonder?" said Stephen, as he laced up his riding-breeches at the knees.

"Don't know. Nothing would surprise me that happened in this place," replied Sam. "I'm afraid we can't stay to investigate its wonders, though. Our duty's to hurry back to Du Plessay, and we must get our horses from Pere le Vandois as soon as possible, and ride for it to Metz."

They made their way out, and were joined by a stalwart man-servant, who respectfully led them, not to the dining-hall, but to a rather smaller apartment, hung with ancient tapestry, and of which the single window opened out on to a small stone balcony, with a high front, looking over the gates of the castle, but two storeys up.

A cheery fire blazed on the hearth. Monseigneur seemed in lighter spirits than the night before, and looked happier than his own followers had seen him for many a day, but there was a grim ring in his laughter, and the fierce, hawk-like face was no less pitiless.

Malmaison had spoken of breakfast, but in Britain the meal set out would have been called lunch, and a good one at that, for the boys had slept till mid-day, and the usual French hour for *café-au-lait*—coffee and milk—was long past.

Sam stepped to the window before sitting down and glanced out. The wide clearing in front of the castle, with the woods beyond, was quite deserted. Nobody was in sight. The two wings of the castle, stretching out at right angles at each end from the main part, in which the gates were, looked very bare and solid, for what few windows there had been in the wings were filled up with masonry. At the back—which, of course, could not be seen from that room—the castle fronted upon a steep precipice, and was quite unapproachable, as the marquis informed them.

"It must have been an impregnable castle in the old days," said Sam. "A splendid fortress; but, of course, modern

soldiers—enough of them—would soon open it up, wouldn't they, sir?"

"As you say," said Malmaison affably, "it could not hold out long, yet a little damage might be done before it was taken. Permit Jean to give you a little more grilled black game. We are proud of our black game here in the mountains."

"Excellent, indeed! Jolly good!" murmured Stephen to himself. "Wish they fed us like this on service."

"By the way, have you any plans for to-day?" asked the marquis. "Can I arrange a programme for you?"

"We only wish we could stop," said Sam; "but duty's duty, you know, sir. We've got to get back with that report, and as it's a long way to Pere le Vandois's cottage, where our horses are, we ought to start at once."

"I fear you will be delayed an hour," said Malmaison.

"After that you will be able to start, but, accomplished scouts as I know you to be, you would find it impossible to get through the forest unseen at present. We are completely ringed in by Uhlans."

"By Uhlans!" exclaimed Sam.

"There are sixty in the edge of the wood now," said Malmaison, choosing himself a devilled biscuit from a dish Jean handed him, "more or less in hiding. They are waiting for the word of command to ride full pelt up to the gates and break their way in. A much larger force is coming up to back them."

"Do you mean it, sir?" said Sam, staring, for there were no preparations of defence made that anyone could see. The castle looked bare and deserted, and even Malmaison's handful of mountaineers were not in evidence. The gates, Sam knew, looked strong, but could not offer much real resistance.

"But certainly," said Malmaison, helping himself to a glass of wine with the greatest coolness.

"If sixty Uhlans can't carry this old house in a brace of shakes it's a funny go," said Stephen to himself, wishing fervently that his carbine were at hand. "They wouldn't even expect any resistance to such a force; but the marquis is just having a joke with us."

"There's little your scouts don't inform you of, it seems, sir," said Sam; "but will these Uhlans get into the castle?"

"That," said Malmaison, rising, and walking leisurely towards the window, "is a question that will now answer itself. You are not afraid of a stray bullet or so, of course? Ah, I thought so! Here they come!"

He led the way out on to the wide stone balcony, and, even as he did so, a troop of fully sixty Uhlans came spurring out of the fringe of the woods at full gallop, and thundered across the open space towards the castle gates.

"Sections, dismount! Force the gates!" cried the officer in command. "In with you, men!"

Half a dozen troopers were off their horses in a moment as the troop reined up short under the walls, and the dismounted men at once attacked the gates with long crowbars.

Hardly had the bars touched the gate when a fierce rattle of rifle-fire broke out from numberless unseen muzzles. From both wings of the castle a score of narrow slits spurted forth jets of thin smoke, and a terrible cross-fire was poured into the attacking force.

A dozen saddles were emptied in less than half as many seconds. Shouts of dismay and startled oaths rang above the firing, and the troop was thrown into confusion. There was no shelter for man or beast, and troopers and horses were rolling over by threes and fours as the deadly cross-hail of lead came among them.

Sam, as amazed as any of the Germans who were in the thick of it, leaned over the balcony and looked down. Malmaison, erect and cool, watched approvingly, and gave a low, grim laugh.

"My wolves can still bite while I lead them!" he said.

"The gates—get the gates down!" shrieked the Uhlan captain. He had not yet realised that it was impossible, for the rifles behind those slits in the masonry commanded the gates from either side, and the dismounted men had fallen at the first discharge.

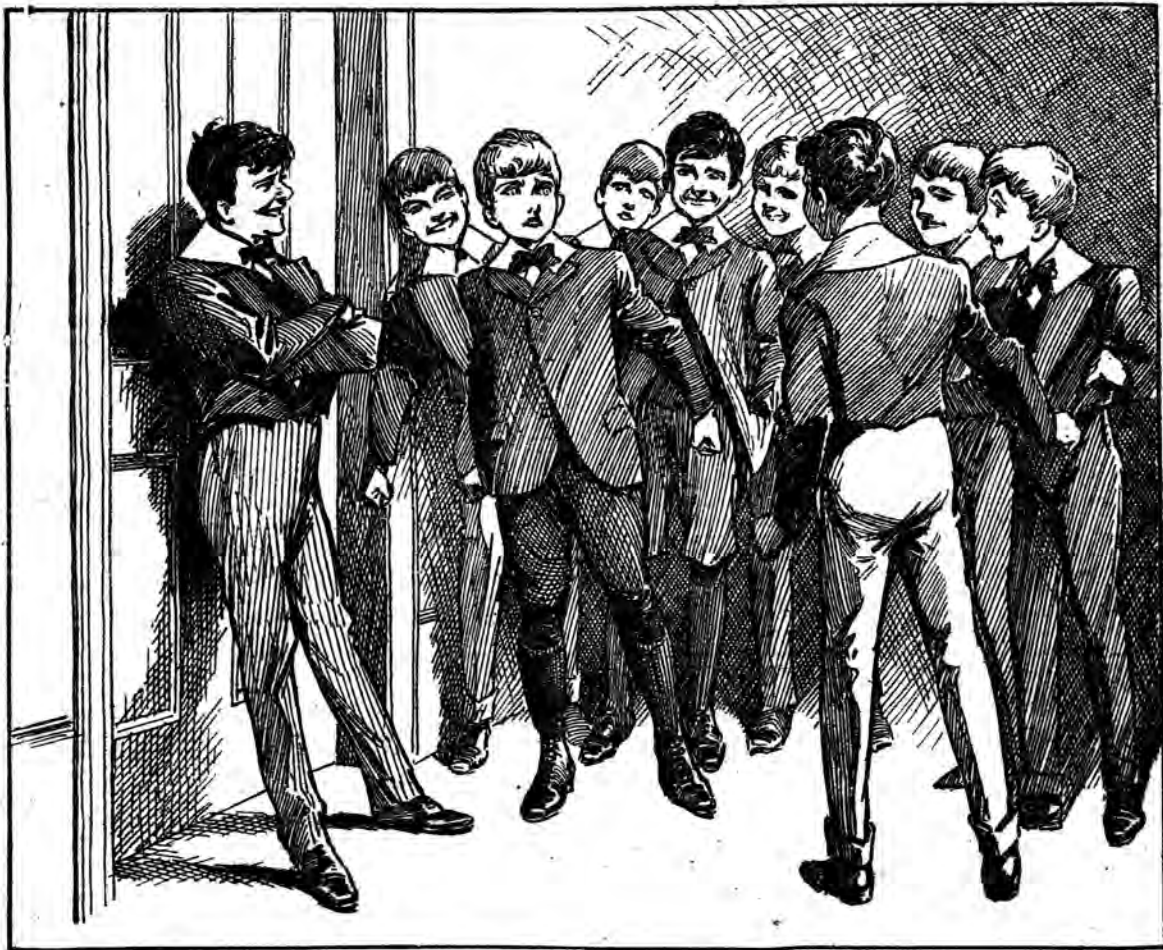
On every side men were dropping fast, and those who tried to pick up the crowbars shared the fate of the others. There was a final volley, a scene of wild confusion, and a mere scattered remnant of the Uhlan troop broke back for the woods, leaving forty dead and wounded behind them.

"By James," cried Stephen, carried away with excitement, "it's an absolute rout! It's—"

Smack! came a bullet against the stone within an inch of his shoulder. Another struck the angle of the wall just by the seigneur's cheek, stinging his face with tiny splinters of stone; but he remained perfectly cool.

"They are sniping at us out of the wood," he said, "which reminds me that you two young gentlemen have an important errand to fulfil, so I must not expose you needlessly."

He stepped back into the room, after motioning the boys



"Let me get out!" shouted Nugent minor, looking round upon the grinning faces. Some of them were quite cruel in expression, too, especially Gatty's. It dawned upon Dick Nugent's mind that he had fallen among foes. (An amusing incident in the long complete school tale of Harry Wharton & Co., in the Special Double Number of "The Magnet" Library, now on sale. Price One Penny.)

to go in front of him. The brothers looked at each other wonderingly, as they found themselves in the apartment again.

"That was a knock-out!" said Stephen. "Why, that troop's pretty well wiped off the list. What fools they were to ride up like that!"

"Not at all; it was the right thing for them to do," said Sam. "They could not expect a fusillade like that, knowing there are no French troops here. Did you expect it yourself?"

"Hanged if I did!"

"It is the unexpected that happens at Malmaison," said the seigneur, seating himself at the breakfast-table again. "These old arrow-slits in the walls, which I generally keep masked, are just as useful for riflemen as they were for archers in the good times past. I have a store of repeating-rifles, and my men know how to use them fairly well. At such close quarters one does not miss."

"It was the biggest surprise I ever saw, sir," said Sam; "but don't the men need you to lead them?"

"They have their instructions," replied the marquis, cracking a walnut. "I saw that this morning. Will you not finish your dessert? I am recommended these crystallised cherries."

Sam and Stephen were flabbergasted by the seigneur's nonchalance. He did not as much as glance out of the window, where the last of the wounded Uhlans could be seen disappearing into the woods beyond the clearing.

"Are they beaten off for good, then, sir?" exclaimed Stephen.

"Oh, no! There are a hundred and fifty more about a mile back down the valley. They are coming to reinforce, but it

was thought these sixty would easily take the castle beforehand."

"You knew that?"

"My scouts are able to inform me of many things," monseigneur replied.

"But will the hundred and fifty men be beaten off like the others, sir?" asked Stephen incredulously.

"Naturally not. They have learned their lesson. A one-pounder Maxim—what you call pom-pom—will be brought up. They have one with their rearguard," said the marquis; "they will shell the gates with it till they are beaten down." "Then they'll be able to rush the castle, sir, and get in!" cried Stephen.

"Precisely. They will enter Malmaison itself."

"Can your men beat such a number once they are inside, marquis?"

"No, that is scarcely possible. They will carry the castle, these Uhlans—that is certain."

"Is there no way you can keep them out, then, sir?" ejaculated Stephen, wondering what was to become of the little garrison.

"I do not particularly want to keep them out," said monseigneur quietly. "I shall make them welcome to Malmaison. We are very hospitable we De Brissacs. They will carry the castle, as I said. Afterwards, the castle will carry them. That will explain itself presently to you. If you will not have any more dessert, shall we go downstairs? I have a few words to say to my men."

Wondering what was going to happen, the boys followed their hosts on a tour of inspection round the lower interior of the castle. The machinery, so to speak, that had caused the rout of the Uhlans was then visible. Over forty grim

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NEXT
THURSDAY:

"THE ST. JIM'S RINKERIES!"

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

mountaineers, each with a repeating Marlin rifle, and a little stool beside him on which were abundant cartridges ready to hand, were posted at each of the narrow slits in the stonework of the walls.

All of them saluted the marquis with the deepest respect as he passed, and he returned their salutes. It was evident that they had a strong affection for their grim over-lord, and, indeed, for that matter, they would have died for him like dogs, and have felt honoured to do so.

Monseigneur made a tour of all the defences, speaking for some time with his head man, and then made his way to a great bare stone hall, whose one barred window looked out over the precipice on the north side of the castle.

Here the men who had been defending the walls assembled, leaving only a few, at monseigneur's orders, at their posts. He had commanded them to forgetful, and soon the band of armed billmen were together, waiting for their lord's word.

The seigneur looked at them for some moments in silence, and then spoke in a quiet, even voice.

"My children," he said, "the time has come of which I warned you. That which I had to do is done. A certain vow which I made is accomplished, and I have now only to complete the work."

No man spoke, but all kept their eyes on the seigneur.

"Before another hour is past the end will have come. You have done well, my wolves. You have hunted cunningly, and bitten deep. But now you may get back to your lairs. I am here to say farewell to you."

"I do not choose to sacrifice your lives now that no good can be done by it," said monseigneur. "You will go back to your homes, such as they are, in safety by the road you know of. And you will go at once. Two alone will remain with me, and they are already chosen. In these hands you may leave the fate of Malmaison. Go, my children!"

More than one of the fierce, dark mountaineers dashed a tear from his swarthy cheek as they turned to go. Each saluted as he went, and the salute was returned formally. They disappeared, and their footsteps died away down the stone passage.

"They didn't like going; but there was no need for me throwing their lives away," remarked monseigneur thoughtfully at last. "And now, gentlemen, it is time that you, too, took your leave of me. Here comes Bertrand," he added, as one of the mountaineers returned. "He has seen the others on their way, and has come back by my orders to lead you out."

"Out? Where, sir?" said Stephen.

"Bertrand will show you. Put yourselves in his hands. He will take you back to the place where you left your horses. Also, he will be the guide who will meet you and the troops at Pont d'Ours."

"But if we can get out safely, why shouldn't you, sir?" exclaimed Stephen. "We can't leave you here. Why shouldn't you save yourself?"

"I cannot permit you to argue with me," said the marquis quietly. "I am the last of the Malmaisons, my boy Paul being also dead. Our house and race are now close upon their end. But I shall remain to welcome these German gentlemen to whom I owe so much."

The boys did not know what to say. It seemed terrible to leave their host to his fate.

"Messieurs, it desolates me to part with you," said the marquis, "but the guns are already blowing in the gates."

The boys decided quickly. They had their work to do, and the report must reach Du Plessy at any cost.

"We will go, sir," said Sam, "since there is no choice. But for our errand we would stay with you. Good-bye, and thank you a hundred times for what you have done for us!"

The marquis bade them as courteously a farewell as if no enemy had been within a hundred miles, and in the meantime the gates were dashed to atoms and laid low.

Sam and Stephen, feeling heavy-hearted enough, departed with their guide Bertrand. Already, the Uhlans could be heard rushing in through the smashed-down gates. The last the boys saw of the seigneur, he was mounting the stairs which led to the tower of the dungeon-keep, and with him were but two men—the mountaineer whose life Stephen had saved the day before, and the old servant. Even then neither of the two boys knew whether the seigneur expected to live or die, or what he meant to do.

"Those stay with my lord," muttered Bertrand, leading the way down a long flight of steps to the cellars. "I wish with all my heart I was staying, too; but he has ordered me on other service. This way, messieurs, and quickly!"

He led them through a perfect maze of cellars, lighting a horn lantern as he went. Once well below, all sound from above was deadened, though the two boys knew the Germans must now be pouring into the castle by scores.

Even Sam could not have found his way back through the labyrinth of passages. Soon a dark cellar was reached, the floor of which was thick with rushes and litter. A large stone slab had been lifted up like a trapdoor, showing a cavity below.

"Is this where the others passed through?" said Stephen.

The guide nodded briefly, and the boys, descending, found themselves in a narrow tunnel, driven first through the solid rock, and then through hard, stony earth.

How far they went through this underground tunnel they could not have said. It seemed to them miles long. But presently a faint glow came in sight as the end was neared, and after several turns they came out in a small wooded dell, where the entrance of the tunnel was thickly screened by bushes and dense ivy.

The guide, motioning to the boys to wait, went out first, and soon led them out in turn.

"The road is clear before you now," he said. "You are on the hill side just below the castle, and those German pigs are too busy yonder to worry our path to the next valley. Would it please you first to take one look back upon Malmaison before we push on? It may be done safely."

He took them cautiously to the crest of a small hillock, and the boys, to their surprise, found they were no great way from the castle, and were themselves well screened from sight by the bushes.

All about the chateau mounted and unmounted Germans were moving, while a large force had evidently entered the interior, to find as yet no resistance. On the top of the dungeon-keep, behind the battlements that fringed its tower, suddenly came into view the tall form of the seigneur, erect and fearless, standing with folded arms, his huge stature showing black against the sky.

"Is he going to make his last stand there?" exclaimed Stephen, a lump rising in his throat.

"He awaits his enemies, who are swarming up inside the tower," said Bertrand, the guide, grimly, "and the first one will receive his personal attention. Ah, here he comes!"

The first of the Uhlans to gain the top of the tower by the stairway inside was a burly captain, who came suddenly into view, and sprang at Malmaison.

In an instant he was seized in the grip of the gigantic Frenchman, swung high up at arm's-length, and hurled down from the tower.

The rest swarmed up into view at the moment, and it seemed as though the seigneur were about to be overpowered. And then the end came as suddenly as it was terrible.

There was a dull, thunderous roar as the dungeon-keep and the bulk of the great castle were rent asunder and blown into the air by an explosion that seemed to shake the very mountains, overwhelming attackers and defenders alike in one common fate.

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(Another long instalment of this serial will appear next week.)

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