In this Number: THE SCHOOLBOY JOCKEY A Tale of Tom Merry & Co.

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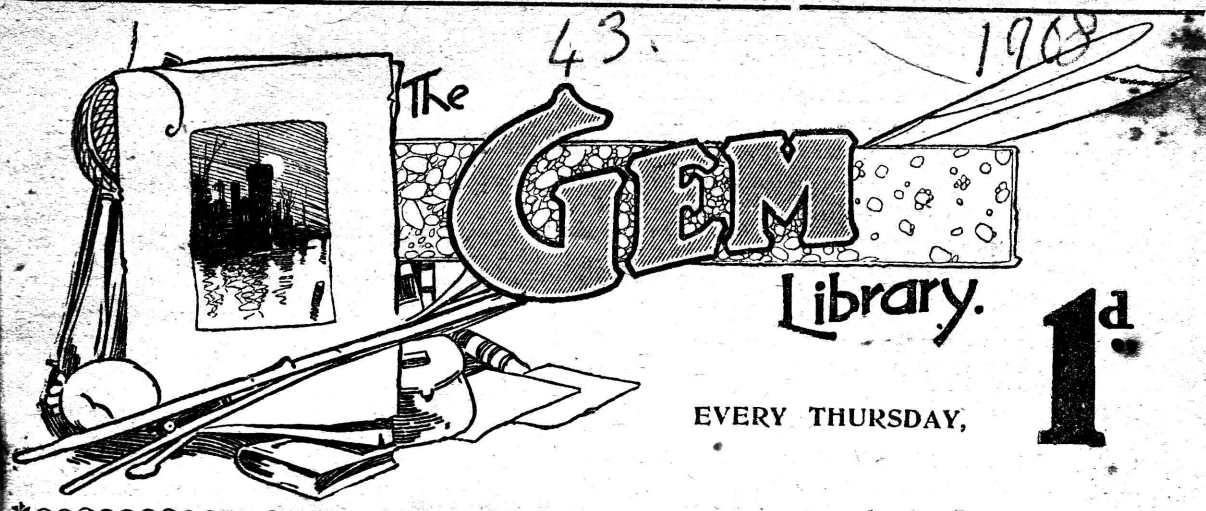
The Water Jump in the Last Lap: D'ARCY LEADS!



Complete Stories for Everyone, and Every Story a Gem!

The SCHOOLBOY JOCKEY.

A Splendid Long, Complete Tale of

TOM MERRY & Co.

By Martin Clifford.

CHAPTER 1.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy Surprises His Chums.

"LOOK!"

"Who is it?"

"What is it?"

"Why is it?"

"Weally, deah boys——"

"My only hat! It's Gussy!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Gussy, by Jupiter!"

Now, Blake, Herries, and Digby knew perfectly well that it was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy all the time. But, really, there was some cause for their astonishment as D'Arcy presented himself at the open door of Study No. 6 in the School House at St. Jim's. For they had never seen the swell of St. Jim's quite like this before.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was always elegant, and his clothes and his hats were the wonder and despair of the dandies of St. Jim's. It was nothing unusual for him to come out with novelties in ties, surprises in waistcoats, and the very latest thing in silk toppers. But this time——

Blake stared, and Herries stared, and Digby stared.

"Do I sleep, do I dream, do I wonder and doubt?" murmured Jack Blake, in the famous words of Truthful James. "Are things what they seem, or is visions about?"

"Weally, Blake——"

And they stared at him as if they would stare holes in him. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy adjusted his eyeglass, and gave them a look, and then crossed to the big glass on the study wall—an extensive mirror that gave a reflection of the full-length figure, and which the swell of the School House had had placed there at his own expense.

D'Arcy surveyed his reflection with considerable satisfaction. And indeed he did look very handsome and elegant.

He was dressed in riding clothes that fitted him to a hair. His riding-boots shone more brightly than the mirror they were reflected in. His coat was a triumph of colour. He flicked his boots with a nobby little whip. He took a leisurely survey of himself, turning round slowly and looking over his shoulder, to get the full effect.

His chums watched him silently.

"Bai Jove," said D'Arcy, at last, "I think I shall do!"

Jack Blake assumed a thoughtful expression.

"That depends," he remarked. "What are you going in for? If you have booked yourself for Tussaud's show, you will do rippingly!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"But what's the game?" demanded Blake. "We've come out from morning lessons for exactly twenty minutes, and ten of them are gone. In ten minutes you've got to bunk back into the class-room and grind Latin. What do you mean by springing this coat and those tops on us all of a sudden? What's the wheeze?"

"That's it," said Herries, "what are you up to? Jolly lucky thing for you my bulldog isn't in the study. He would be bound to go for that coat!"

"If your wotten bulldog did anythin' of the sort, I should stwike him with my whip, Hewwies," said D'Arcy, with dignity.

Herries chuckled. D'Arcy's nobby little riding-whip would probably not have troubled Towser very much.

"I suppose," said Blake reflectively—"I suppose the duffer's off his rocker. That's the only possible explanation."

"My word," said Digby, "if he's not clean off!"

"Weally, Blake, I am not off my beastly wockah, and if you would kindly give me time to explain——"

"Go ahead! If you're not balmy in the crumpet, what's the matter? You'll have to change back into your Etons in eight minutes!"

"I am not goin' to change back into Etons to-day, deah boy."

Jack Blake grinned.

"Are you going into the class-room to grind Latin in hunting-tops, ass?"

"I am not goin' to gwind Latin to-day."

"How's that?"

"Out!" said D'Arcy. "I mean, I am goin' out."

"You—are—going—out!" repeated Jack Blake, in measured tones.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Where?"

"To the Tytchley meet."

"Eh?"

"The fact is, deah boys, that I am goin' huntin'."

"You are going hunting!" said Jack Blake faintly. "Oh, I knew it would turn out! I knew that his waistcoats were a certain indication of insanity in the family. I had a feeling all along that we should lose Gussy—that he would be snatched from us in the bloom of his youth and shut up in a lunatic asylum!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"And now it's come! Right off his rocker! Absolutely babbling!"

"I wefuse to be regarded as absolutely babblin'!" said Arthur Augustus, with some heat. "I suppose a gentleman has a wight to go huntin' on a mornin' in the season, without a lot of wottahs cacklin' at him?"

"My dear duffer, you're not going hunting—you're coming into the class-room in seven minutes to grind Latin," said Blake pityingly.

"I am goin' to do nothin' of the sort. I have dwessed to go huntin', and if you fellows like to come down to the gates you can see me off!"

"We can do that here, Gussy—I've seen you off for a long time—fairly off! Poor old Gus! Fancy strait waistcoats instead of fancy ditto, and——"

"I wefuse to wemain here and listen to these wibald wemarks!" said D'Arcy, going to the door. "If you chaps like to come and see me off, I shall be vewy glad of your company as far as the gates of the coll."

Blake, Herries, and Digby looked at one another. They had been engaged in making a new cage for white mice, and they left it where it was, and followed Arthur Augustus out into the passage.

There was a yell from the corner where the Shell passage branched off. Three sturdy juniors were coming along with linked arms, and they stopped in blank amazement at the sight of Arthur Augustus.

Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther—the chums of the Shell Form—stopped; and Monty Lowther reeled against the wall, and Manners hung on to Tom Merry, and Tom Merry gasped. The Terrible Three seemed absolutely flabbergasted.

"What is it?" sobbed Monty Lowther, in solemn Shakespearian strain. "What may this mean, that thou, dread spook, revisit'st thus the glimpses of the moon?"

"My only Aunt Matilda!" gasped Tom Merry. "It is Gus—it's the one and only! Are you fellows starting a circus?"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"It's all right, you chaps," said Blake resignedly. "Gussy's mad, but he's not dangerous; you can come quite near him. He won't bite or anything!"

"Is this a new jape?" asked Tom Merry, as the Terrible Three came nearer on receiving Blake's assurance. "Is Gussy dressed up like this to go hunting for deponent verbs or Greek roots?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I am goin' huntin'," said D'Arcy, with dignity; "and I decline to listen to these exceedingly diswespectful and wibald wemarks."

And he walked down the passage with his elegant walk.

Tom Merry stared at Jack Blake.

"What's the little game?" he demanded.

"Blessed if I know!" said Blake. "He says he's going hunting!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He doesn't look mad," Manners remarked, laying stress on the word "look."

"Appearances are deceptive," said Lowther, with a shake of the head.

"I suppose it's a sudden attack," said Tom Merry. "Better follow him and see that he comes to no harm."

And the juniors followed the swell of the school out of the house. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's appearance in the quadrangle was hailed with wonder and delight by the boys of St. Jim's. There was a crowd round him immediately. It was a cold, clear winter day, with a gleam of frost on windows and trees. The boys were enjoying the brief respite from morning lessons, and nearly everybody was in the quad. There was a yell as D'Arcy appeared, and walked steadily downs to the gates.

"Look!"

"My hat!"

"It's Gussy!"

"Or his ghost!"

"Beau Brummel in pink!"

"Chesterfield in tops!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus walked on apparently unconscious of these remarks, which he would doubtless have characterised as disrespectful and ribald. The juniors stared, and the seniors stared; and the fags of the Third Form marched after the swell of the School House, apparently under the impression that D'Arcy had got up the show wholly and solely for their amusement.

It was quite an ovation. When Arthur Augustus arrived at the gates, he had an escort of fifty or sixty fellows, all delighted and curious. The swell of St. Jim's took up his stand in the gateway, and looked anxiously down the road towards Rylcombe, flicking his boot with his whip the while.

CHAPTER 2.

Not a Thoroughbred.

TOM MERRY & Co. pushed through the crowd at the gates, and Arthur Augustus turned his head to glance at them. Then he glanced down the road again. Some of the fags behind struck up a chorus:

"A-hunting we will go,
A-hunting we will go!
A-hunting, hunting we will go,
A-hunting we will go!"

"Young wascals!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Wally, I am weally ashamed to see you shoutin' among those diswespectful young wottahs!"

D'Arcy minor—more commonly known as Wally—grinned.

"What's the game, then?" he demanded rather aggressively. "What do you mean by coming out in this rig, when you've got to get into the class-room in five minutes?"

"I am havin' a day out!"

"My only Aunt Jane!"

"As a mattah of fact, Wally, Cousin Ethel and her eldah bwothah, Captain Cleveland, are at the Tytchley Meet to-day, and the Head has given me his permish to join them there," D'Arcy condescended to explain.

The juniors stared.

"Then you're not off your rocker?" exclaimed Tom Merry, in tones of astonishment.

"No, Tom Merry," said D'Arcy, with hauteur; "I am not off my wockah!"

"And you're really going hunting?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

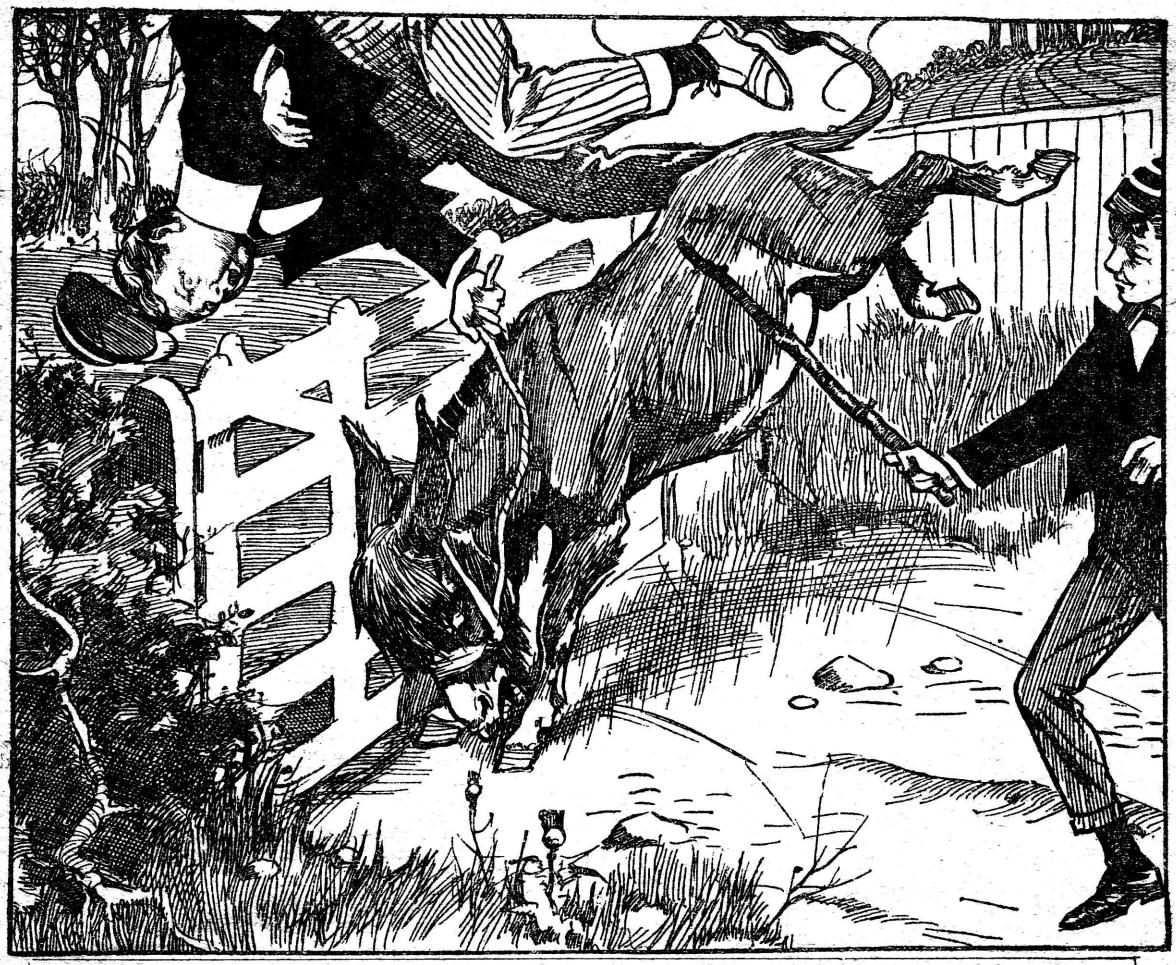
"The Tytchley Meet is at twelve," said Wally, who was of the horsiest of horsey tastes, and knew all about these matters. "You'll have to buzz to get there. How are you going?"

"I am goin' to wide."

"Where's your mount, then?"

"Jones is sendin' me a nag up fwom Wylcombe."

"My only Aunt Jane!" repeated Wally. "Fancy you going; and me being left here! Didn't they mention me——"



Right up to the gate went Nicodemus with a rush. But there, unfortunately, he refused to leap. His head went down, and his hind legs went up, and Fatty Wynn, with a wild yell, shot forward over his ears.

"No, they didn't; and a kid of your age wouldn't be allowed, anyway."

"They'd allow it fast enough, if I could get a mount and get there!" chuckled Wally. "Do you remember how I took the ditch at home at Eastwood, Gus, when you funked it, because you were afraid of spoiling your clothes?"

"That statement is absolutely untwue. You pushed past me in the most wude mannah," said D'Arcy warmly. "I am afwaid that you are what would be chawactewised as a thwustin' scoundwel, Wally."

"Ha, ha! I say, Gus, suppose I go instead of you?"

D'Arcy's only reply to this suggestion was a glare through his eyeglass. Then he looked up the road again.

"Bai Jove, there's the gwoom!"

Two horses had come into sight from the direction of the village, one ridden by a groom, who was leading the other. Arthur Augustus smiled with satisfaction.

"Bai Jove, I shall get off now!"

"I wouldn't get on, though, if I were you," said Blake, who was scrutinising the approaching horses. "I wouldn't ride that lump of catsmeat for anything."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

As the groom came nearer, D'Arcy's face changed.

The led horse was certainly not what could be called a picture. Jones, the livery-stableman in Rylcombe, had some good horseflesh in his stables, but perhaps he had not taken D'Arcy's note, asking for a mount, with due seriousness. Perhaps he thought anything was good enough for a schoolboy.

At all events, the horse brought a frown to D'Arcy's face, and a grin to every other.

He was probably an old 'bus-horse, sent to linger out his last days at easy work in the country, and probably Mr. Jones did not think he was worth feeding too plentifully. He did not look like it.

The groom halted. There was a half-grin on his horsey visage as he touched his cap.

"Master D'Arcy!" he said.

"Yaas, I am here," said D'Arcy, fixing his eyeglass upon the man. "I pwesume that you do not mean to say that you have bwought that—that thing for me?"

"This is the mount, sir."

"You weally mean to state that Mr. Jones has sent that wotten bag of old bones for me to wide in the huntin' field?" exclaimed D'Arcy, with growing indignation.

"Yes, sir. Fine horse, sir. Not too restive."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry. "He'll have to have a few oats inside him before he gets restive, I think."

"Westive!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy indignantly. "I should think the poor bwute wasn't westive. I don't want a horse that is not westive. I want a horse I can wide."

"You could ride that horse, sir."

"I could sit upon the bwute, I suppose?" said D'Arcy. "I would just as soon wide a beastly clothes-horse."

"It's a safe mount, Gussy," Blake remarked.

"I pwesume that you doubt my powahs as a widah, Blake?"

"Not at all. I believe you could ride that horse."

"Weally, Blake!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wefuse to wide that animal," said Arthur Augustus. "Take the poor bwute back, and tell Mr. Jones that I wefuse to touch him with a pair of beastly tongs, and that I will pay for him to have a feed, if the shock isn't likely to kill him."

"Then you don't want a hoss, sir?"

"Yaas, wathah; I want a horse, not a thing like that."

A bell rang across the Close, and the grinning juniors began to turn away. It was time to return to the classrooms. The chums of the School House swell were yelling with laughter at the sight of the mount sent for him, but the distress in his face made them take a more serious view of the matter.

"It's too bad," said Tom Merry. "I haven't seen Gussy ride, and I don't know if he could manage anything more dangerous than a rocking-horse, but, certainly, he couldn't go to the meet on that wreck."

"Good hoss, sir, very quiet."

"But I don't want a quiet horse," said D'Arcy. "Bai Jove! I shall be late for the meet, if I don't huwwy like anythin'. What shall I do, deah boys? Advise me!"

"Better go on a bicycle," said Monty Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah!"

"Borrow Taggles's pony!" said Gore.

"Pway shut up, Goah!"

"Time we were in the class-room," said Lowther. "Come on, Manners! Tom, you ass, you'll get lined."

"I'm coming."

Most of the fellows were hurrying in. Manners and Lowther hurried off. Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, was not to be argued with. Wally was already gone. Herries and Digby walked away with the Fourth Formers. Arthur Augustus, however, was not left alone in his glory. At the risk of "lines," Blake and Tom Merry lingered at the gate.

"Bai Jove! I have nevah been in such a wotten pickle before," said D'Arcy. "I know Jones has some good stuff in his stables, and I welied on him."

"It's hard cheese," said Blake, taking the matter seriously, at last. "If you're really going to the meet——"

"Of course I'm goin'."

"You can't go on that old crock," said Tom Merry. "You don't want to be late, either. Suppose you buzz along and see if Jones has anything else in his stables."

The groom touched his cap.

"Nothing else, sir!" he said. "There's been a run on the stables for the meet. Good many gone from Rylcombe, sir. There's nothing left but Badger. I dessay you've seen Badger, a lively rip, he is, and the grooms don't dare to mount him."

D'Arcy's eye sparkled behind the monocle.

"Yaas, he's a wippah."

"Mr. Jones is sorry he couldn't send anything better than this, but——"

"I wegard Mr. Jones as havin' failed to tweat me with pwopah wespect, my man," said D'Arcy. "Why didn't he send Badger?"

"He'd kill you, sir."

"I should be quite willin' to take the wisks of that."

"Begging your pardon, sir, but Badger's a vicious brute, and a boy couldn't sit him, nohow, sir."

"I wathah fancy I know my own business best," said D'Arcy. "I am goin' to have Badgah. You fellows had bettah wun in. The bell's stopped wingin', and you'll be lined for being late."

Tom Merry laughed.

"We're late already," he remarked. "May as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. It will mean fifty in any case, now."

"I am sowwy, Mewwy."

"That's all right, Gussy. I'd rather be late for class than have you late for the meet," said Tom Merry good-naturedly. "I wish I could help you out. But you can't ride Badger, you know."

"Wats, deah boy!"

"Don't be an ass, Gussy!" said Blake anxiously. "I've seen the brute at Jones's place, and he's savage. The grooms can't ride him."

"I twust I can wide bettah than a gwoom."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Blake!"

"Look here, Gussy, I shouldn't care to mount Badger, and I'm a Yorkshireman," said Blake, with the air of one propounding a clincher.

"Vewy poss," said D'Arcy. "But I am goin' to mount him. I know the countwy, luckily, and can take the short cut to Tytchley. Get back with that wotten cwock, my man, and tell Mr. Jones I'm comin' to take out Badgah!"

"I'm afraid he won't let you 'ave him, sir."

"I shall not argue about the mattah," said D'Arcy. "I am goin' to have Badgah. I wegard Mr. Jones as havin' failed to play the game."

"But—but it's beastly hard work even getting the saddle on the brute, sir," said the groom.

"Yaas, I dare say it is," assented D'Arcy. "Pway have him saddled and bwidled weady for me when I awwive. I shall be there as quickly as I can walk. Take this half-soveweign, my man, and pway do your best."

"Certainly, sir," said the groom, touching his cap.

He cantered off with the led horse. Arthur Augustus turned to his companions.

"Good-bye, deah boys!"

"Look here, Gussy——"

But Arthur Augustus was already walking swiftly down the road towards Rylcombe.

CHAPTER 3.

Arthur Augustus in a New Light.

TOM MERRY and Jack Blake looked at one another in doubt and dismay. What was to be done? They were already late for third lesson, and lines awaited them when they went into their respective class-rooms. But to let D'Arcy go and get his neck broken—for that was what they expected would be the result of his visit to the stables if they allowed him to have his way—was not to be thought of.

"My hat!" said Tom Merry. "What's to be done?"

"We can't let him go."

"Lot of good arguing with Gussy when he's made up his mind."

"We could yank him in by his ears," said Blake thoughtfully. "I really think that's the best thing we could do, under the circumstances."

Tom Merry laughed.

"But he's going to meet Cousin Ethel at Tytchley, and it's rough on him not to go. I shouldn't wonder if Jones could find him a better horse if he liked. Suppose we go down with him and see."

"What about lessons?"

"Well, we're late already. I'm game if you are."

"Oh, I'm game," said Blake, grinning. "Come on! We can't let the one and only Gus get his neck broken. If he can't find a safe mount, we'll stop him."

"That's right."

And the two juniors hurried down the road after D'Arcy. The swell of the School House was walking at a rapid pace. He was not distinguished as a pedestrian, but on the present occasion he put his best foot foremost. He usually declared that he found walking "exhaustin'"; but, just now, he was in deadly earnest. Tom Merry and Blake had to run to catch him. D'Arcy glanced back at them as they came up, without stopping.

"Bai Jove! you fellows. You're late for lessons already."

"That's all right, Gussy. We're coming down to Rylcombe with you."

"But weally——"

"We're going to look after you."

"Wats!"

"If you say rats to me, your lawful lord and master, I shall probably interrupt this walk by dotting you on the nose," said Blake severely.

"Pway don't wot, Blake! Can't you see I'm wowwied?"

"That's all right, old son."

"I'm glad to have you with me," said D'Arcy. "You can help me to persuade old Jones, in case he pwoves wecalcitwant."

"But, really, Gussy——"

"You haven't seen me wide?" said D'Arcy.

"Oh, yes, I've seen you wide at cricket," grinned Blake. "Very wide, sometimes, Gussy, when you are bowling."

"Oh, pway don't wot at a sewious moment, Blake. I am a weally wippin' widah, you know, and I have widden in steeplechases at home at Eastwood. I should like you fellows to come there some vac. and see me in the Eastwood colours, bai Jove!"

"But about Badger?"

"I have widden wuffer horses than Badgah," said D'Arcy, with a superior smile. "He will just suit me, you know. Ah, here's Wylcombe!"

"But suppose you break your neck?"

"I wefuse to suppose an impossibility, Tom Mewwy."

"What will D'Arcy minor do without you—without anybody to tell him to wash his inky fingers and put on a clean collar?"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—— Ah, here is Jones's!"

A strong smell of horses announced when they were near the establishment of Mr. Jones. D'Arcy led the way into the mews, and in the cobbled yard he found the groom who had come to the school, speaking to a stout, florid-faced man, who was immediately recognised as Mr. Jones.

"Good-morning, young gents!" said Mr. Jones. "I'm sorry you didn't like the hoss, Master D'Arcy. Nice, quiet animal. Just suited to a lad of your years."

"I wegard you as havin' failed to play the game, Mr. Jones. Pway let your man twot out Badgah!"

Mr. Jones grinned.

"He'd kill you, young gentleman."

"Pway twot him out. I have to wide acwoss countwy to the meet, and I have no time to waste."

Mr. Jones winked at the groom.

"Bring him out, Dick!"

"Yes, sir."

The groom disappeared into the stables. There was a sound of clattering hoofs against a box, as a horse was taken out of it. Dick, the groom, reappeared, leading a horse, saddled and bridled as D'Arcy had directed. The half-sovereign had done its work, though both Mr. Jones and his man had not the slightest belief that D'Arcy would venture to mount the horse when he saw him at close quarters.

It was a handsome animal—clean-limbed, well-proportioned, with a fine head, well set. But there was a lurking demon in its eyes, and Dick, the groom, was keeping a tight grip and an alert eye as he led it out.

"'Ere he is, young gentleman."

Jack Blake gave a whistle. At home in Yorkshire he had ridden all kinds of horseflesh, but he would not have cared to mount Badger for a ride. As he put it to Tom Merry, he could have done it, but he did not hanker after it. But Arthur Augustus D'Arcy surveyed Badger with supreme satisfaction.

In fact, a change seemed to have come over D'Arcy with the change into his riding-clothes. There was a quickness, an alertness in his manner which his chums had never noticed there before, and an expression of determination on his face which gave it quite a new look. It was evident that the swell of St. Jim's was not soft all through, after all.

"Bai Jove, what a wippah!" he exclaimed.

"He'll rip you to rags," said Tom Merry. "Keep off him!"

"Wats, deah boy!"

"You can't handle him!"

"Bai Jove, I'm goin' to twy!"

"Gussy, keep off the grass!" exclaimed Blake. "The brute will roll you over on the cobbles!"

"Wats!"

"He'll spoil your clothes," said Tom Merry.

That ought to have been a clincher. Such an appeal had never been lost on D'Arcy. But to the amazement of the juniors, he simply replied:

"Blow my clothes!"

Tom Merry stared at Blake, who stared at him in return. What had come over Arthur Augustus? If he no longer cared for his clothes, what did he care for?

While they were lost in amazement, Arthur Augustus walked towards the horse. There was not the slightest trace of nervousness in the junior's manner. Perhaps it was for that reason that Badger stopped pawing the cobbles, and ceased to lay back his ears.

"Keep off him, sir!" exclaimed Dick, the groom, in alarm, as he saw that D'Arcy really intended to mount the brute.

"Wats, my man!"

"Master D'Arcy, don't get near him!" shouted Mr. Jones.

"Wats!"

Arthur Augustus walked up to the horse with perfect calmness. He patted him on the nose with his gloved hand, and Badger did not shear off his hand with his sharp white teeth, as Dick and Mr. Jones fully expected. The horse seemed to like it rather than otherwise. D'Arcy put his hand to the saddle.

"'Eaven's sake, sir!" gasped Dick, the groom.

"Stand back!"

D'Arcy rapped out the words, and Dick stood back, letting go the horse in sheer amazement. The next moment the swell of St. Jim's was in the saddle.

"Out of the way!" yelled Mr. Jones, dodging behind a heap of refuse swept from the stables. "He'll start now."

Dick, the groom, swung himself behind a door. Tom Merry and Jack Blake crowded back to give the horse room.

For the moment Badger seemed astounded at finding somebody on his back. Then he gave a squeal, and suddenly his hind legs went up into the air

"My hat!" gasped Blake. "Poor old Gus!"

The juniors sprang forward, ready at any risk to save D'Arcy from the fury of the horse, when he crashed down on the cobbles

But to their amazement, D'Arcy was sitting tight, and though his eyeglass fell off and fluttered at the end of its cord over the ears of Badger, the swell of St. Jim's showed no sign whatever of falling off.

"My hat! He can ride!"

"Good old Gussy!"

Tom Merry and Blake receded again, and leaned against the brick wall and watched. Their astonishment was great, but not so great as their admiration, for D'Arcy's horsemanship was a revelation.

Badger's hind heels came down with a crash that struck sparks from the cobbles, and then his fore legs went up.

He staggered backwards on his hind legs, as if he were going to fall over on his rider, and D'Arcy sat tight, only his lips setting in a hard, determined line.

Down came Badger again on his forefeet with a clatter, and then he seemed to go in for a display of equine fireworks, clattering up and down, and round and to and fro with endless, restless, tireless motion.

And through it all D'Arcy was like a rock.

The struggle ended as suddenly as it began. Badger stopped still, with a sort of shake, and then stood like a lamb—quite subdued.

Mr. Jones stared at the horse blankly.

"My honly 'at!" he gasped. "He's—he's ridin' Badger!"

"Good-bye, deah boys!" said D'Arcy. "I'm goin'!"

"Bravo!" yelled Tom Merry.

"Hurray!" shouted Blake.

Arthur Augustus, with his reins in his left, lifted his hat with his right, and bowed in response to the cheer as he rode out of the stable-yard. He clattered through the cobbly mews, and out into the old High Street of Rylcombe, Tom Merry and Blake following, and Mr. Jones and the groom, and a stableman following them, all excited and astonished.

And a really handsome figure the swell of St. Jim's made as he cantered up the street on his spirited mount.

"Well, my word!" said Mr. Jones. It was all he could say.

"My word!" said Dick, the groom.

"My word!" said Bob, the stableman.

Jack Blake looked at them with the smile of superiority.

"Jolly lot of Doubting Thomases you were, weren't you?" he said. "Perhaps you'll believe next time that a fellow from St. Jim's can ride."

And the horsey gentlemen had nothing to say. Tom Merry and Blake strolled away towards St. Jim's. Tom Merry was laughing.

"I say, Blake, that was pretty cool, you know," he remarked. "You didn't believe that Gussy could do it."

Jack Blake chuckled.

"Never mind, they had no right to disbelieve in a St. Jim's fellow," he said. "But what a little ripper he is, isn't he? Fancy Gussy!"

"I never thought it of him!"

"Nor I. By Jove, it was worth getting lined to come here and see Gussy start!"

"Yes, rather!"

Twenty minutes later the two juniors presented themselves at their respective class-rooms at St. Jim's. Fourth lesson was nearly over.

Jack Blake marched into the Fourth Form-room meekly enough, and little Mr. Lathom blinked at him over his glasses.

"Blake, I have marked you absent."

"I am sorry, sir."

"Have you any excuse to offer?"

"Yes, if you please, sir. I thought I ought to go with D'Arcy to Rylcombe, sir," said Jack meekly. "He was going to mount a dangerous horse, sir, and I thought I ought to see that he came to no harm."

The Fourth Form master blinked dubiously at Blake.

"You should have asked permission, Blake."

"Yes, sir, only I had to run after D'Arcy to catch him as it was."

"Very well, under the circumstances, I will excuse you, Blake."

"Thank you, sir."

And Blake took his place in the class with much satisfaction. Tom Merry was not so fortunate. He entered the Shell class-room, and Mr. Linton's eyes fixed him immediately like a pair of gimlets.

"Merry! You are late—you have missed a lesson without permission."

"Yes, sir. I——"

"Where have you been?"

"To Rylcombe, sir. I——"

"You will take two hundred lines, Merry."

"If you please, sir——"

"That is enough. Go to your place."

And Tom Merry made a grimace, and went to his place.

CHAPTER 4.
The Meet.

"ARTHUR!"

It was Ethel Cleveland—better known to the boys of St. Jim's as Cousin Ethel—who uttered the exclamation. The girl, looking very charming in her riding-habit, was sitting a handsome roan horse at the covert side, next to a muscular Guardsman with a good-natured, ruddy face. Cousin Ethel gave a bright smile and a nod to her cousin as he came up.

Arthur Augustus raised his hat with a grace that was all his own. The big Guardsman looked at him.

"It's Arthur" said Cousin Ethel.

"Begad, so it is!" said Captain Cleveland. "How de do, Arthur? That's a decent mount you're on, begad!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Cold day for waiting," said the captain. "I don't believe they will ever throw off, begad—I don't really."

And the captain listlessly watched the distant huntsman, and chewed his under lip, while the hounds were patiently drawing.

"I am so glad you were able to come, Arthur," said Cousin Ethel.

"Yaas, bai Jove!" said D'Arcy. "It was so awfully kind of you to think of me, Ethel. I know that the captain's note to Dr. Holmes was your ideah."

Cousin Ethel smiled.

"I thought you would like the chance of a run, Arthur."

"Bai Jove, and you were wight!" said D'Arcy. "Though I came near bein' pwevented fwom comin'. The wotten man sent me a wotten old cwock, you know, to wide. I nevah felt so insulted in my life!"

"That is a handsome mount you have, though."

"Yaas. I insisted on havin' him. He is a good beast, weally, and I like him. I am glad I was in time, Ethel. I am goin' to wide with you and keep an eye on you, you know."

Miss Cleveland smiled again. She was a fearless horsewoman, and she mentally resolved that Arthur Augustus would have all his work cut out to keep an eye on her.

"By the way, who is that wottah stawin' at me?" went on D'Arcy. "I wegard his stare as bein' both wude and impertinent."

Cousin Ethel coloured a little.

A young man on a black horse was watching the swell of St. Jim's with a far from amiable expression, and it was evident that D'Arcy's proximity to Miss Cleveland was not agreeable to the onlooker.

The young man—or, rather, boy, for he was only a few years older than D'Arcy—was well-mounted, and he sat his steed like a good rider. His face was dark, almost swarthy, and his eyes black and scintillating. He looked like a foreigner, but he seemed to know a great many people at the meet.

"That," said Ethel, without looking round. "I believe his name is Algarotti."

"Bai Jove! I don't like the way he looks at me," said D'Arcy. "I wondah whom he may happen to be?"

"An Italian, I think," said Cousin Ethel.

Captain Cleveland looked round.

"Algarotti!" he said. "Yes; he's the son of an Italian banker in London. A young puppy, I think, begad! Rides well, though."

The young Italian pushed his horse nearer to Miss Cleveland, as if wishing to push between the young lady and her cousin.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's eyes glinted.

He shifted Badger a little, so that the Italian could not possibly carry out his purpose without making a scene, and Algarotti bit his lip and desisted.

Captain Cleveland, who was watching anxiously for the start, had no eyes for this little incident, but it did not escape Cousin Ethel, whose fair cheeks grew a little deeper in colour.

She glanced round involuntarily, and Algarotti took the opportunity of raising his hat.

"It is a pleasure to see you again, Miss Cleveland," he said.

He spoke perfect English, and as D'Arcy learned afterwards, he had been born in England and brought up at an English school, his father, the banker, being a permanent resident in London.

Arthur Augustus was to be brought into very close contact with young Algarotti, though he did not guess that just then.

Cousin Ethel nodded distantly to the Italian. Then she fixed her gaze steadily ahead of her, watching the coverts.

Algarotti bit his lip.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was no fool, in some matters, at least, and he saw at a glance how matters stood between Ethel and the Italian, as it was natural they should stand between a sensitive girl instinctively disliking a character she half-understood, and the passionate foreigner who was determined to force his acquaintance upon her whether she liked it or not.

And the swell of St. Jim's inwardly resolved that he would keep close by Cousin Ethel's side that morning, and see that the swarthy rider was kept at a distance.

Captain Cleveland uttered a sudden exclamation of satisfaction.

"They're off!"

The hounds had found at last.

There was a stir and a drawing of breath; the wait at the covertside had been impatiently borne. The huntsman's horn rang a note through the crisp air, and the whole line moved on.

In the first field Algarotti made an attempt to range up beside Ethel.

Captain Cleveland was away ahead; he evidently did not regard it as a brotherly duty to stick by his sister's side during the hunt, and his powerful horse was carrying him on with great strides.

Cousin Ethel was riding well. She took hedge and ditch with fearless precision; and Arthur Augustus rode by her side in a way that would have made the St. Jim's fellows open their eyes if they could have seen him.

Algarotti ranged up on the other side of the girl, but the nature of the ground kept him at a certain distance.

And the swell of St. Jim's was soon giving him a lead, which he strove in vain to make up.

Away ahead of him, and of half the hunt, went the swell of St. Jim's and his fair companion, and Algarotti pounded after them on his big black.

Then the savage, passionate nature of the Italian showed itself, as he lashed his horse, and jammed the spurs against its flanks.

It was not to urge it to greater efforts so much as to wreak his own rage upon some living object that made Algarotti use whip and spur.

The horse, thus tormented, bounded on furiously, but Algarotti was under the disadvantage of not knowing the country, while both Cousin Ethel and Arthur Augustus had hunted it before.

Well ahead the two kept, and many a glance was thrown towards them, for they made a really handsome pair.

The chums of Study No. 6 in the School House at St. Jim's would have been proud of Arthur Augustus if they could have seen him then.

"Tally-ho!"

Two notes on the horn rang over the woodlands.

"Bwavo!" exclaimed D'Arcy. "Bai Jove, half of them are behind!"

The hunt was indeed melting down; a good half of the riders were hopelessly behind, or had taken to the roads, for the country was heavy, and the going extremely difficult in the best of places.

Cousin Ethel nodded, with a bright smile.

The colour was flushing her cheeks, and her eyes were sparkling; the excitement of the dash across country was in her blood, as it was in D'Arcy's.

"Look out, deah boy—I mean, gal!" sang out Arthur Augustus. "Bettah wide wound that beastly bullfinch!"

Cousin Ethel shook her head.

Right at it she went, and her roan rose to the leap splendidly, and the hedge—which had stopped two or three bold riders and turned them along to a safer spot—flashed beneath her horse's hoofs.

A second later Arthur Augustus rose to the leap, and clattered down on the safe side of the bullfinch, but Algarotti was not so lucky.

The big black came thundering up, but the savage punishment his master had given him had had its natural effect in throwing him into a state of nerves.

The black baulked at the leap, and swung aside, and Algarotti was dragged along, with his coat tearing on the shaggy brambles of the bullfinch hedge.

The Italian ground his teeth furiously.

In justice it must be said that he had pluck, and he would have taken the leap at the risk of a broken neck, but his horse's action gave him no choice in the matter.

He lashed the unfortunate animal savagely, and drove it on to the nearest gap, where the big black pounded through, and Algarotti spurred him forward again.

But the huntsman and the hounds were far ahead now, and riding close behind the pack Algarotti could discern two figures through the openings of the woodland—the figures of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and Cousin Ethel—a good quarter-mile ahead of him.

CHAPTER 5.
A Challenge.

ALGAROTTI rode his hardest and best, but he did not come near D'Arcy for the rest of the run. The fox got away at the finish, and there was no kill, and after vainly casting for the scent, huntsman and pack gave it up. But the run had been hard and long, and there were not more than five or six riders at the finish, among them Arthur Augustus and Cousin Ethel and her brother.

Algarotti joined them as they gave up waiting and turned their horses homewards.

D'Arcy put up his eyeglass and gave the Italian a look which he considered quite sufficient to send him on his travels, but it had no effect upon Algarotti. The Italian had had a fall, and was splashed with mud, and although he kept his temper well in hand, it was simmering furiously. His black eyes glinted whenever he looked at D'Arcy, and but for the presence of Ethel Cleveland he would probably have proceeded to something more than words.

"You had bad luck, Algarotti," Captain Cleveland remarked.

"Yes," said the Italian; "my beast refused a hedge. He was startled by a boy taking a clumsy leap just before him, instead of keeping clear."

Arthur Augustus turned his head, with a flush in his cheeks.

"If you are speakin' of me, sir——" he began.

The Italian laughed unpleasantly.

"Come, then, you must be aware that you jumped sideways!" he exclaimed.

"Nothin' of the sort! I jumped as stwaight as a die. Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus indignantly. "I wathah think I can jump stwaight at a fence! Besides, you were a good minute behind."

"I was close behind, and you baulked me by your clumsiness!" said the Italian coolly. "I excuse you; it comes of the Master allowing boys in the hunting-field!"

D'Arcy went crimson.

"Weally——" he began. Then he caught an imploring look from Cousin Ethel, and stopped. "Vewy well, have your own way," he said.

Captain Cleveland looked at them, and then rode on beside his sister. Cousin Ethel was looking troubled. She foresaw bitter blood, and she felt that she was herself inadvertently the cause of it. She tried to keep D'Arcy close to her, fearing a quarrel with the Italian if he left her side. D'Arcy was only too glad to keep close, and the Italian had to drop behind in the lane they were following home.

"Hard cheese to lose the brush, after all!" Captain Cleveland growled discontentedly.

Cousin Ethel smiled at D'Arcy.

"I am rather glad!" she murmured. "It is so ripping to ride across country, but—but I am sorry for the poor, dear fox!"

Arthur Augustus chuckled.

"What pwice the poor, deah poultwy he gobbles of a night?" he asked. "I am thinkin' of joining a society for the pwevention of cwuelty to chickens, and then it will be necessawy to hunt foxes fwom a sense of humanity."

Cousin Ethel laughed.

"You are growing quite witty, Arthur."

"Well, as a mattah of fact, I heawd young Wally say that," said D'Arcy. "He's an awfully sarcastic little beggah, you know."

The lane had narrowed to a mere track. Captain Cleveland was taking a short cut, partly to save time getting home, partly because it would get rid of Algarotti the sooner. As soon as he came to his own road the Italian would have to leave them. In the narrow track Arthur Augustus was compelled to drop behind, and found himself riding with Algarotti.

The Italian gave him an unpleasant look, his lips curling up into a sneer of contempt. D'Arcy felt his temper rising. He was the best-tempered fellow in the world, as a rule, but any insult to his horsemanship touched him on the raw, so to speak; and the young Italian's manner was deliberately insulting in addition.

"Now that we can speak without bein' ovahheard by a lady," said Arthur Augustus, "I wish to wemark that your statement just now was absolutely incowwect. I did not take the leap sideways; a D'Arcy always takes his fences stwaight."

The Italian shrugged his shoulders.

"I repeat what I said," he replied. "Your utter clumsiness spoiled my leap, and nearly gave me a fall. I shall complain to the Master about allowing clumsy and inexperienced boys in the field!"

D'Arcy's eyes glinted.

"I wathah think that the Mastah will not listen to a wank outsidah!" he exclaimed. "Captain Cleveland's uncle is Mastah of the Tytchley, and he is hardly likely to pay any attention to a wottah like yourself, I think!"

Wally waded in, and followed the poacher across the rocky bed of the stream.

"Ah! What did you call me?"

"A wottah!" said D'Arcy. "You have made a statement that is absolutely untwue. I did not jump sideways, as you know perfectly well; but you wanted to make me look widiculous in Miss Cleveland's eyes. Your mount wefused the hedge, I firmly believe, because you had been ill-usin' it, like the bwute you are! There's the twuth in plain English, if you want it!"

The Italian gritted his teeth.

"You are a relation of Miss Cleveland?" he asked.

"I have the honah to be her cousin."

"Ah! For that reason I pardon you, and let you off from the chastisement I should otherwise inflict for your insolence!"

Arthur Augustus smiled contemptuously.

"You need not twouble to pardon me," he said; "I don't want to be let off! Miss Cleveland is out of sight now, and I am quite willin' to dismount and give you a sample of how we box at St. Jim's!"

"I am not likely to fight with a schoolboy!"

"Then keep your beastly tongue between your wotten teeth," said D'Arcy, "or I warn you that you won't have any choice about the mattah!"

The Italian gave him a dangerous look, but did not reply.

"Yaas, wathah!" resumed D'Arcy. "Your horse looks a likely beast, and he wouldn't have baulked at the bullfinch if you had known how to wide him!"

"Would you compare your riding with mine, you insolent cub?"

"Yaas, wathah! I would wide with you on any course in England, flat, hurdle, or steeplechase, and undahtake to leave you stwanded!" said D'Arcy instantly.

The Italian's eyes glittered.

"I accept your challenge!" he exclaimed.

"Yaas, but——"

"Ah, you withdraw, and eat your words!" exclaimed Algarotti scornfully. "You are but a braggart boy after all."

D'Arcy coloured.

"I should be only too glad to wide with you, and take some of the feahful cheek out of you, Mr. Algarotti; but as a mattah of fact I am, as you have politely wemarked, a schoolboy, and——"

"And, therefore, it would befit you to hold your tongue in the presence of your elders!"

"You are not vewy much my eldah, I pwesume, and you are a wude beast," said D'Arcy. "All the same, a match can be awwanged, and I will get my governah to wite to the Head at St. Jim's, and get me leave to wide."

"You will probably find some means of eluding the test."

"Bai Jove, I will teach you to know me bettah, you wottah. I will wide with you if I have to wun away from school to do it!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, with sparkling eyes. "I can get permish if my governah helps me, too. I would wide this animal against your black any time."

"That—that hack——"

"Bai Jove, I'll wide him, and show you whethah he is a hack or not," said the swell of St. Jim's. "He left you behind to-day, at all events."

"Because you were a clumsy——"

"That is not twue."

"You call me a liar?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Algarotti grasped his riding-whip. It seemed for a moment that he would slash the English boy across the face. It would have cost him dear; but at that moment Captain Cleveland came riding back.

"Hallo, you two!" he exclaimed. "My sister has gone in, Arthur. I suppose you are coming in to lunch before you go back to the college?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The Italian gritted his teeth. He would gladly have accepted an invitation to lunch at Cleveland Lodge.

"Then good-day!" he exclaimed, raising his hat. "You will not forget our compact, Mr. D'Arcy?"

"Wathah not!"

And the Italian rode on his homeward way. Arthur Augustus and Captain Cleveland turned their horses towards the Lodge. The captain looked at his young cousin curiously.

"Were you quarrelling with the bounder?" he asked. "He is a bounder, begad."

"Yaas, I suppose so," assented D'Arcy. "He actually had the feahful cheek to cwiticise my widin, you know."

The captain grinned.

"Did he, begad! He came a purler, and I believe it was through spurring too hard," he remarked. "He's a good rider, I've noticed that, but a cruel brute to his mount."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"What did he mean about a compact?"

"We have awwanged to wide—my Badger against his black—in a cwoss-countwy wide— a point-to-point steeplechase, you know."

The captain whistled.

"That's rather a serious undertaking for a schoolboy, Arthur."

"All the bettah for bein' a schoolboy; I'm as light as many a jockey, and you know that I can wide."

"Yes, I know you can ride," assented Cleveland. "But that mount of yours—is he up to Algarotti's black?"

"I think so."

"Can you get permission?"

"Well, as a mattah of fact, I was welyin' on you to help me," said Arthur Augustus. "I shouldn't like the fowcign cad to think that an English chap was afwaid of him, you know, and if I didn't meet him, he would think so. I want you to put it to my governah, as an old sport, you know."

The Guardsman grinned.

"I don't exactly know how Lord Eastwood will play up to the character of an old sport," he remarked. "But certainly I'll do my best for you. You must lick the cad."

"Yaas, wathah!"

And with Captain Cleveland's influence on his side, Arthur Augustus had little doubt of getting Lord Eastwood's influence, too, and then all would be right at St. Jim's. And he was already looking forward to the steeplechase.

CHAPTER 6.

A Pass for Six.

HALF-PAST four rang out from the clock tower of St. Jim's, and the Fourth Form and the Shell poured out from their class-rooms into the wide, flagged passage. Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther looked out at once for the chums of Study No. 6, and found them. Tom Merry slapped Blake on the shoulder.

"Gussy hasn't come back yet," he remarked.

Blake shook his head.

"No. I was thinking that we might run down to Rylcombe, and meet him at Jones's mews," he said. "He's bound to go back there to take Badger."

"I was just thinking the same."

"Good! We'll go together."

Tom Merry made a grimace.

"I've got lines from Linton for being late."

"Hard cheese," said Blake sympathetically. "I got off with Lathom. But I'll tell you what, we'll all lend a hand at your lines, and get 'em knocked off, and risk Linton spotting the writing."

"Good! Many thanks!"

"We're going down to the village, kids," said Blake "and we're going to do Tom Merry's lines first."

"I think I'd better go and get my dog," said Herries. "I want to give him a run as often as possible for his health."

"Herries had a little dog," said Monty Lowther, "as ugly as a crow, and everywhere that Herries went, that dog was sure to go."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Herries marched off without deigning to reply. Herries' motto was "love me, love my dog," and he lived up to it.

The Terrible Three, with Blake and Digby, adjourned to Tom Merry's study, and the lines were knocked off. Five willing hands made short work of them. Then Tom Merry took them to Mr. Linton's study, and Jack Blake went in search of a prefect to get a pass down to the village.

Jack Blake was a diplomat in these matters. There were good-tempered prefects in the School House at St. Jim's, and bad-tempered prefects. Blake ran over the good-tempered prefects in his mind, and considered which one he should ask. Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, was out, unfortunately, and the next best was Darrel. And so Blake tapped at the door of Darrel's study, the light under the door telling him that the Sixth-Former was in his quarters.

There was no reply, and Blake opened the door. Darrel of the Sixth was sitting at the table. There was a letter in his hand, and an envelope with an American postmark lying on the table. The Sixth-Former's handsome face was very set and miserable. Blake looked at him, and wondered Darrel glanced up.

"Blake! What do you want?"

His tone was harsh, his look angry. Blake backed away.

"It's all right, Darrel," he said hastily. "I—I didn't know you were busy."

The prefect's face changed. He laid down the letter.

"It's all right, Blake. I'm not busy. You can come in."

"I don't want to bother you——"

"Come in!"

Blake came in. The prefect looked at him.

"What do you want?"

"Well, I was going to ask you for a pass, Darrel. It's an important matter, and——"

The prefect smiled faintly.

"I shall have to know a little more about it before I give you a pass to go alone out of bounds after dark, Blake."

"Oh, that's all right," said Blake eagerly. "I—I thought you wouldn't like me to go alone, so I've arranged to take Herries and Dig, and Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther with me, and——"

"And the rest of the Shell and the Fourth?" asked Darrel pleasantly.

"No; that's the lot, Darrel. You see, Gussy has been

away to-day—gone a-hunting, you know, and we want to meet him in Rylcombe to see if he's still alive."

"Nothing else?"

"Honour bright!"

"Good! I'll give you the pass."

And the prefect wrote it out. Blake took it joyfully, thanked Darrel effusively, and bolted out of the study. He met his comrades in the hall.

"Got it?" asked Manners.

"Yes. Darrel's a brick—a real brick!"

"That's no news."

"No; but he is a brick, and no mistake," said Blake warmly. "He was worried about something, and he spoke rather sharply; and then he melted, you know, and I verily believe he let me have the pass partly because he was snappy at first. I only hope he isn't in any trouble. Hallo, Merry! Is it all right?"

Tom Merry laughed as he came up.

"Yes; Mr. Linton was out, and I've left them on his table. If he spots a variety of hands, he won't do it till we're gone, so it's all serene.

"Good! Let's get off; I've got the pass."

"Where's Herries?"

"Blow Herries! If he likes to go cavorting round with a dog instead of coming along to Rylcombe, let him!"

"Right-ho!" exclaimed Manners. "We sha'n't miss him."

Blake gave the Shell boy a glare. He wasn't inclined to allow his own chums to be run down by anybody but himself.

"Talking out of your hat?" he asked unpleasantly. "If you think we're going to start till old Herries is ready, you're off-side, Manners."

"Why, you were saying——"

"Never mind what I was saying. No need for you to repeat what I was saying. Blessed if I know why you can't think of something to say for yourself."

"But I get fearfully peckish in this December weather. And as I was saying, if it's a feed at Mother Murphy's, you can count on us."

"But it isn't."

"Oh!"

"We've got a pass to go down to Jones's stables to meet Gussy coming home."

"Ah, I hear he's been going forth as a bold huntsman!" chuckled Figgins. "I want to see him in pink and tops. We'll come with you."

"What about a pass?"

"Oh, your pass will be enough for the lot of us."

"Ha, ha! We'll try if you like."

"You see, if I asked Ratty, he would refuse; and Monteith, our prefect, mightn't think it was really necessary for us to go and meet Gussy."

"Possibly not. Come on, and chance it," said Blake. "My pass is made out for 'J. Blake, of the Fourth and five others'—names not mentioned. Darrel was in a hurry. I dare say we can scrape through on it."

And the whole party marched out of the gates—New House and School House juniors—together, on the best of terms for once.

It was a brisk walk through the winter dusk to the village. Blake grinned as they came within sight of the lamp that glimmered over the entrance to the mews.

"You always know you're near Jones's by the niff," he remarked. "I must say I like the scent of horses about a place. It's so homely."

"I like a doggy scent myself," said Herries.

"Yes, you would! Keep a hold on that brute; if he does any damage there will be a row."

"Towser is not likely to do any damage."

"H'm! I rather think otherwise. The brute is trying to get loose now."

"Here's Herries!" exclaimed Digby.

"Yes, here he is; he hasn't kept us waiting a minute," said Blake, in an aggrieved tone. "I don't see what Manners wants to keep on grumbling for, for one."

"I wasn't grumbling——"

"Well, don't argue about it. Let's get off."

"But it was you who said——"

"Are we going to the village, or is this a conversazione?" asked Blake, in a tone of hopeless resignation.

"Look here," began Manners wrathfully, "you said——"

"Oh, come on!" exclaimed Tom Merry, laughing.

"But Blake said——"

"Ain't you ready to start?" asked Herries. "Towser's tugging at his chain, you know. He doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"Oh, if his Majesty Towser is ready, we must be off," said Lowther, in the vein sarcastic "When Towser says turn, we all turn!"

"Oh, come on!"

"I wonder where that young rascal Wally is?" Blake remarked, as they crossed towards the gates. "He would like to come down with us and meet Gussy."

"He can never be found when he's wanted, and we can't hang about for him," said Manners.

"Oh, all right! Hallo, Figgy!"

Three juniors met the School House chums on their way to the gate. They were Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn—the chums of the New House.

"Going out?" asked Figgins.

"Well, we look like it, don't we?"

"Yes, ass! What's on?"

"My overcoat. Likewise my hat, and my boots."

"Oh, don't be funny," said Fatty Wynn. "Is it a feed? If it is, I don't mind coming with you. I'm peckish."

"I've never met you when you were not," Tom Merry remarked.

"Well, I get so hungry this time of the year," said Fatty Wynn pathetically. "I've always got a pretty good appetite——"

"Ha, ha, ha! I've noticed that!"

The bulldog was indeed tugging at his chain, and Herries had all his work cut out to hold him in.

"Some of you have been looking at him, or something," he said wrathfully.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I don't like people to annoy my Towser. He doesn't like being looked at."

"He wants to go for the horses, more likely," said Monty Lowther.

"Towser never goes for horses; he's too well brought up."

"Perhaps there's another dog in the yard," said Blake. "The brute is excited about something. Shall I help you with that chain?"

"I can manage it."

The juniors plunged into the dusky mews. From the cobbled stable-yard came the sound of a voice they knew well:

"Let go!"

"D'Arcy minor!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"Then the young rascal's here?"

"Looks like it! I wonder what mischief he's up to now?"

And the juniors hurried on to see what the redoubtable Wally was "up to."

CHAPTER 7.

The Return of the Hunter.

WALLY was stooping behind a big wire cage in the stable-yard. Dick, the groom, was seated upon an upturned pail, holding back Pongo, who was trying to get loose. Bob, the stableman, was standing by, and at a distance was Mr. Jones, looking on with a good-humoured grin. It was evident that the scamp of the Third Form at St. Jim's was in high favour at the stables.

"Let go!" rapped out Wally.

He had just slipped the door of the cage, and let a large rat out. The rodent, his little black eyes glittering

with mingled fear and savageness, bounded out of the cage, and Dick, the groom, let the dog go.

"Pongo! Fetch him!"

Pongo was after the rat like a shot.

The ragged, shabby-looking brute that was Wally's dearly-beloved pet at St. Jim's had many qualities that endeared him to his master, though his looks could not be said to count much in his favour.

He was a good ratter and a good rabbiter—qualities of which Wally was proud in his pet, but which had frequently got the Third-Former into trouble on Pongo's account.

"Fetch him, Pongo!"

The terrified rat raced up the stable-yard, and Pongo raced after him, and the stablemen and the young rascal from St. Jim's watched the contest with breathless interest.

But all of a sudden there was a late entry into the race, for Towser, who never could be held in when his fighting instincts were aroused, had broken away from Herries, and was tearing into the stable-yard.

He was on Pongo's track in a flash.

"Look out, there!" yelled Wally. "Here, keep that brute off!"

The juniors from St. Jim's came hurrying up.

"He's got loose," said Herries; a piece of rather superfluous information under the circumstances.

"He looks like it," agreed Figgins.

"Perhaps he's hungry?" said Fatty Wynn. "I can understand him being a bit keen if he's hungry, you know."

The race was short. Pongo would certainly have had the rat, but before he could have him Towser had flung himself at Pongo. The bulldog, with a ferocious growl, flung himself upon the mongrel, and the next moment they were rolling on the cobbles in furious combat.

The rat whisked off into a corner and vanished.

Wally rushed forward with a howl.

"Get that brute off, Herries, you dummy! He'll scrag Pongo!"

"Well, he likes scragging mongrels," said Herries.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry. "Let Towser alone, Wally; he likes it!"

Wally seized a stable-broom, and rushed to the rescue of his favourite. Towser, with the stiff head of the broom biffing on his ribs, decided to let go Pongo. Herries called him off, and got hold of the chain again. Towser was licking his chops, and Pongo was licking a stream of claret that flowed from his shaggy coat.

"Not much hurt, I hope?" said Blake, looking at Pongo.

"Not serious," said Wally. "Pongo's too jolly artful to let a dog get a good grip on him. What he wants in size he makes up in artfulness. Don't you, Pongo, old boy?"

And "Pongo, old boy" whimpered.

"Lend me your handkerchief, Figgins, will you?"

"What for?"

"To wipe the blood off his coat."

"Yes, rather—I don't think!"

"'Ere you are, sir," said Dick, the groom, handing Wally a stable-duster. "'E ain't much 'urt, sir; he's too tough."

"You're right, Dicky. Blessed if I know what these silly duffers wanted to come in with that clumsy, great brute of a bulldog for. These kids are always getting on the grass somehow."

"Well, I like that," said Tom Merry, laughing. "We ought to have waited to receive orders from a grave and reverent signior of the Third Form."

"Oh, don't be funny!"

"I don't know what the fags of our school are coming to," said Monty Lowther, addressing space. "My belief is that they want a good licking every morning, to remind them that they are only inky little microbes."

"Yes, rather!" said Figgins. "When I was in the Third I was kept in my place."

"You would be," said Wally. "Things have changed since your time. You won't catch the Third Form of our days taking much notice of you fogies."

Before Figgins could think of a suitable reply to this remark there was a clatter of hoofs on the cobbles, and Badger came in, with D'Arcy in the saddle.

The swell of St. Jim's lifted his hat gracefully to the crowd of juniors and the admiring stablemen.

Mr. Jones came forward with a grin.

"Had a good day, sir?" he said.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus, as he slipped from the horse. "Badgah has given me a wippin' time, Mr. Jones. We didn't kill, but I was in the first flight all the time, and there were only four with me at the finish, and it was all Badgah's doin'." And D'Arcy patted the horse's neck, and Badger, to the amazement of the stable-hands, snuggled his muzzle against the junior's sleeve.

"Good!" said Tom Merry. "Badger seems in a good temper."

"He's all wight," said D'Arcy. "All wight, only he wants a firm hand and a good widah. He's gwoin' quite fond of me, and I like him awfully. I weally wish the Head would let me keep him at St. Jim's, and I would twy to purchase him of Mr. Jones. I am afwaid Dr. Holmes would make a fuss, howevah."

"Ha, ha! I'm afraid he would!"

"I shall be widin' Badgah again next Wednesday, Mr. Jones," said D'Arcy. "You will let me have him; and if you want to make some money, deah boy, I can put you on to it."

"Hallo! Don't leave your old friends out," said Figgins. "We're all on when it comes to making money, Gussy."

"Yes, rather!"

"You youngstahs are out of it, as bettin' is not allowed at St. Jim's," said D'Arcy. "But I think it probable that Mr. Jones's pawents allow him to make bets."

Mr. Jones grinned. As he was on the shady side of fifty-five, it was indeed probable that his parents had left off guiding his conduct in these little matters.

"Very likely," said Monty Lowther. "Are you of age, Mr. Jones?"

"Haw, haw!" said Mr. Jones.

"Give Badgah a wub down, my man," said D'Arcy anxiously. "Let him have some oats, only not too much at pwesent, you know. And mind he has a dwink before you give him the oats, and don't give him both together."

"Yes, sir."

After riding Badger, D'Arcy was emperor of the stable-yard, and the men would have done anything for him. Even Wally, for once in his life, looked up to his elder brother with something like respect.

"But what are you going to do next Wednesday?" said Tom Merry. "You're not going to another meet, surely? And you can't bet on a hunting run, anyway."

"Not at all, deah boy. I'm widin' in a steeplechase on Wednesday."

"A what?"

"A which?"

"Gammon!"

"Rats!"

Arthur Augustus jammed his monocle into his eye, and surveyed the incredulous juniors with perfect calmness.

"I have stated the exact facts," he replied. "Pway don't gas it all ovah the coll., howevah, as I have not obtained the Head's permish. yet, and he would think it a cheek if it came to his ears."

"Yes; very likely."

"But it's all wight. Captain Cleveland has undertaken to make my governor play the game, you know, and Lord Eastwood will see the Head about it."

"But what on earth have you to do with steeplechasing?" demanded Blake, in wonder and doubt. "I hope he isn't off his rocker, after all."

"I am not off my wockah."

"Then what—who—which——"

"You see, it happened in this way. There was a thwustin' scoundwel in the field, and I left him miles behind—well, a quartah of a mile, at least, to be absolutely cowwect—and he was wathah wotten about it. He is an Italian, a foweign wottah, named Algawotti, and he had the feahful cheek to speak to my Cousin Ethel, though I looked at him."

"And he spoke after you looked at him?" asked Monty Lowther gravely.

"Yaas; wathah!"

"My hat! He must either be blind, or else have a constitution of iron!"

"Pway don't wot, Lowthah! As we wode home, we had a little argument. I was perfectly polite to him, and told him he was a wottah and a wude beast——"

"Ha, ha, ha! What would you have said if you had been impolite?"

"He pwovoked me. He actually had the feahful impudence to cwiticise my widin', and wanted to make out that it was my fault his mount wefused a bullfinch!" said D'Arcy indignantly. "We had an argument, and the long and the short of it is that he challenged me—or I challenged him—well, we challenged each other—and I am to wide Badgah against his black in a point-to-point wace acwoss countwy."

"My hat!"

"I have left all the awwangements in the hands of Captain Cleveland. We talked it ovah before I left him, and it seems that there will be some more entwies, as the captain is thinkin' of gettin' up a sweep, and pewwaps my governah will make a purse. If I win a purse, I shall stand a wippin' feed at St. Jim's."

"Good!" said Fatty Wynn heartily. "Now you're talking!"

"But——" said Blake.

"Bai Jove, you know, that was quite a wun!" said Arthur Augustus, with perfect coolness. "Do you know, deah boys, I wathah thought I should win!"

"It's all wight, Blake. I shall win."

"I've no doubt Lord Eastwood will be able to fix it with the Head, as he's one of the governors of the school," remarked Tom Merry; "but where do we come in?"

"I have thought of you, deah boys!" said D'Arcy, with a beaming smile. "That's why I fixed Wednesday, because it's a half-holiday at St. Jim's, and you fellows will be able to get over to the course on your jiggahs and see the finish, though you won't be able to see the beginnin'."

Jack Blake slapped the swell of St. Jim's heartily on the back—so heartily that he staggered and nearly fell on the cobbles.

"Weally, Blake——"

"Gussy, I've felt inclined to have you painlessly suffocated lots of times," said Blake; "but I'm glad now that I didn't go to the expense."

"Weally, deah boy——"

"You're a good little ass! I don't care what anybody says—I'll maintain anywhere that you're a good little ass!"

"I wefuse to be wegarded as an ass——"

"Let me slap him on the back," said Lowther. "I can't express my feelings any other way. Let me——"

"Pway keep off, Lowthah! I uttahly wefuse to be slapped on the back! Mr. Jones, I had no time to consult you before acceptin' the challenge, but I pwesume you will let me have Badgah?"

"Will I?" said Mr. Jones enthusiastically. "Why, if you can break him in to steeplechasing, he'll be worth a cool hundred to me, Master D'Arcy.

"Bai Jove! Then you can count on the hundwed."

"He's a rippin' 'oss!" said Mr. Jones. "Half-bred, as you can see; but look at his bone! He could stand any amount of jumping, only he won't. As for the pace, that's nothing to him, if he only chooses to do it. Why, my word," said Mr. Jones, growing eloquent, "that 'oss could win the Grand National if he liked!"

"Bai Jove, I'd like to twy him there!" said D'Arcy. "But I haven't the least doubt that he can beat Mr. Algawotti's black, though that's a good beast. I want you to let me have him for twainin' all the time I can get away from lessons, Mr. Jones—of course, at your usual wates!"

Mr. Jones shook his head decidedly.

"You can have the hoss, Master D'Arcy," he said, "any time, and as long as you like; and if you win a steeplechase on him, that will be payment enough for me. Why, I'd have taken twenty quid for him yesterday. Since you've crossed him, I wouldn't take fifty. Win next Wednesday, and I wouldn't take a hundred! You have him just when you like, and how you like, and as long as you like; and if you say a word about payin', you and me will quarrel."

"Bai Jove, I can't afford to quawwel with you, Mr. Jones, so I won't say a word about payin'," said D'Arcy. "But I weally think I shall win, with a fair field and no favour, and there's a chance for somebody to scoop in some tin. I almost wish I was a bettin' fellow, but I pwomised my governah nevah to bet. I say, it's vewy good of you fellows to come down here and meet me like this. Let's get off. I'm hungwy."

And the juniors said "Good-night!" to Mr. Jones, and left the place. And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had the somewhat unusual experience of being the hero of the party during the walk home.

CHAPTER 8.

The Pass.

"MY only Aunt Jane!" ejaculated D'Arcy minor.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Cave! It's Lathom!"

A little gentleman in spectacles was coming from the direction of the school. The juniors stopped in the shadow of the trees. The December night was dim, but there was no doubt that Mr. Lathom had sighted at least some of them—at the same time that they caught the glimmer of his spectacles in the lane.

"Rotten!" said Figgins.

"Yaas, wathah, if you haven't a pass," said Arthur Augustus.

"The School House chaps have passes," said Figgins. "We three are out on our own responsibility."

"Bai Jove! Then I wathah think you will get impots on Mr. Lathom's wesponsibility."

"What price me?" grunted Wally. "I haven't a pass."

"Get out of sight!" muttered Tom Merry hastily. "He's only seen some of us, you know; and if he doesn't spot you New House kids——"

"Right-ho! Keep him off the scent."

Figgins & Co. plunged into a gap in the hedge, and Wally followed them, dragging Pongo after him. Little Mr. Lathom came up, and blinked at the juniors.

"Ah, you are out late, boys!" he said. "I hope you have permission to stay out of bounds after locking-up?"

"Oh, sir!" said Blake, as if shocked by the possibility of the suspicion that he could stay out without permission.

"Oh, sir!" said Tom Merry, in an equally grieved tone.

"Oh, sir!" said Digby and Herries, Manners and Lowther.

"Weally, Mr. Lathom!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Well, well," said the master of the Fourth, "I should be the last man, I hope, to judge you hastily, but really I must see your permit before I allow the matter to drop. Pray show me yours, Merry."

"I—er—haven't one, sir."

"Ah! I feared as much. I really——"

"Blake has mine, sir."

"Ah, indeed! I shall be glad to see it, Blake."

"Here it is, sir," said Blake meekly.

Mr. Lathom took the pass, and Blake obligingly struck a match for him to read it.

Tom Merry, with a curious twinkle in his eyes, struck another, and held it close to the paper.

"Ah!" said Mr. Lathom. "I see this is a pass signed by a School House prefect, to permit—er—Blake and five others to go to the village."

"Yes, sir."

"I think there are seven of you here."

"Yaas; wathah, sir. But I have only just weturned fwom the Tytchley Meet, and I had the doctah's permish. to go there, sir," said D'Arcy.

"Oh, yes; I remember! Yes; this is quite in order, boys," said Mr. Lathom, having not the faintest suspicion that three juniors and a dog were hiding behind the hedge within six paces of him.

"Thank you, sir," said Tom Merry. "Dear me!"

There was a flare, and the paper caught light from Tom Merry's vesta, and was consumed in a few seconds.

Blake stared at the hero of the Shell.

"Well, you clumsy ass!" he exclaimed.

"Blake!"

"I beg your pardon, sir, but he's burnt up my pass; and now I sha'n't be let in without being reported to the Head by Taggles."

"Dear me! It was very unfortunate."

"It's all right," said Tom Merry. "Don't be a duffer, Blake. Mr. Lathom saw the pass, and knows it was all right, and he won't mind writing us another—will you, sir?"

"Er—no—er—of course not."

"Oh, of course not! That's all right," said Blake. "But it's giving Mr. Lathom a lot of trouble over your clumsiness, Merry."

"Yaas; wathah! I considah that an apology is due to Mr. Lathom."

"It is all right, boys; but—but I really do not see how I am to write in the dark; nor have I either pencil or paper with me," said the master of the Fourth.

"I can manage it, sir," said Tom Merry, nudging Blake in the dark, to let him know that a scheme was on; and all of a sudden it dawned on Blake that the burning of the pass was no accident. "I have a pocket-book here, and I'll scrawl the note, sir, and you can just sign it after reading it."

"Er—very—er—good."

Blake struck a match, and Tom Merry scrawled a permit on a leaf of his pocket-book before Mr. Lathom had time to think it out.

"J. Blake and his friends have permission to remain out of gates till 7 p.m."

"There you are, sir," said Tom Merry. "If you sign that, sir, we shall get in all right; and it will be as good as Darrel's pass."

Mr. Lathom glanced over the paper in the light of a match, and signed it unsuspiciously.

"We shall have just time to get in by seven if we hurry," said Tom Merry. "Of course, you know we would go straight back, sir?"

"Yes; I am sure you would, Merry. But as it is ten minutes to seven now, the pass will make it quite certain," said Mr. Lathom. "Good-night, my boys!"

"Good-night, sir!"

The juniors made a show of walking on, and Mr. Lathom disappeared in the gloom towards the village.

As soon as he was safely gone, Tom Merry ran back, and called to Figgins, and the New House juniors and Wally and Pongo came out into the lane.

"Narrow shave," said Figgins; "but I don't see how we're to dodge Taggles at the gate."

"We could get in over the wall," Kerr remarked.

"Blessed if I don't feel too hungry to climb!" murmured Fatty Wynn.

"We shall be late for calling-over, anyway!" growled Wally. "Lathom has delayed us just long enough for that."

"It's all right," said Tom Merry.

"How is it all right?"

"We've got a pass."

"You had a pass before."

"Yes; but that one was only for six."

Monty Lowther gave an excited whoop.

"My only hat! And I never saw what you were driving at, you artful bounder!"

"Bai Jove!"

Tom Merry laughed.

"This pass is for Blake and his friends," he remarked. "We're all friends—for the present. The number isn't specified. Lathom would have shoved it in if he had known that there was a gang of hooligans hiding behind the hedge, of course. But he didn't know it, though I was afraid that some of Figgins's feet would show over the top of the hedge."

But Figgins only laughed.

"Good egg!" he said. "This saves our bacon, rather."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"It's all right if we get in by seven. Come on!"

"Weally, deah boys, I wegard Tom Mewwy as havin' acted in a weally cweditable and intelligent mannah on this occasion."

"Good! If Gussy approves, the thing is passed and adopted. Tom Merry, go up one."

"Weally, Blake——"

"Hurry up!" said Tom Merry.

The juniors arrived at the gates of St. Jim's and Tom Merry rang a formidable peal on the bell, which brought Taggles out of his lodge in the worst of tempers. The school porter grinned at the sight of the juniors on the other side of the bars.

"Which you'll catch it," he remarked grimly.

"Your mistake, Taggy," said Blake coolly. "Look at this pass, my son."

Taggles looked at the pass that Blake thrust through the bars of the gate, by the light of his lantern. The signature of the Fourth-Form master was enough, and Taggles gave a grunt.

"All right, Taggy?" grinned Tom Merry.

The porter only grunted again. The gates swung open, and the juniors marched in. Taggles closed the gates with a clang that rang across the quadrangle, and showed the depth of his feelings.

Calling over had just finished in the school hall when the juniors walked in. Kildare, who was taking the roll, looked at them grimly. Blake marched up to him with perfect calmness, and presented his pass.

"That all right, Kildare?" he said.

The captain of St. Jim's glanced at it.

"All right," he said quietly.

And the delinquents walked off joyously. Figgins slapped Tom Merry on the back in the quadrangle.

"Jolly good wheeze, Merry!" he said. "You've saved us lines or a licking, and no mistake. Good-night!"

"Good-night!"

And the juniors separated to go to their respective houses—Arthur Augustus to receive quite an ovation from the School House fellows as he went in.

CHAPTER 9.

D'Arcy's Friends Rally Round Him!

TOM MERRY was looking very thoughtful when he came down the following morning. He was thinking; he had had time to consider over his little trick on Mr. Lathom over the burnt pass, and he was not quite clear in his own mind if he had played the game or not.

"I'll have to explain to Lathom," he muttered. "Hallo!" he added, as D'Arcy came along the passage. "Feeling pretty fit?"

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy; fit as a fiddle!"

"Now, I've been thinking, Gussy——"

"Have you weally? Bai Jove!"

"I've been thinking," repeated Tom Merry severely, "that under the circumstances, if you're feeling at all nervous about the race——"

"But I'm not."

"Oh, some fellows are conceited enough for anything, I think! I was thinking that I should be quite willing to take your place, and ride for St. Jim's."

Arthur Augustus jammed his eyeglass into his right eye, and took a leisurely survey of Tom Merry, commencing at the toes of his boots, and finishing at his curly hair.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, of all the feahful cheek——"

"It could be fixed easily enough," said Tom Merry. "The horse goes, you know, with another jockey up—it won't make any difference to the steeplechase, except that Badger would be more likely to win."

"I wegard the mere suggestion as uttahly widiculous."

"Now, be reasonable——"

"I wefuse to be weasonable—I mean, I wefuse to entertain any such pwoposition for a fwaction of a second."

"I suppose it's no good arguing with an obstinate duffer," said Tom Merry, in a tone of resignation. "I thought that, at a moment like this, it was a time for your friends to rally round you. You don't seem even grateful."

"I assure you, Tom Mewwy, that I don't feel in the least gwateful for such a weally widiculous offah."

"Oh, rats!" said Tom Merry.

Arthur Augustus went on his way. Blake met him in the hall, as he was going out to get a sniff of the morning air before breakfast, and gave him a nudge.

"I was just wanting to speak to you, Gussy."

"Go ahead, deah boy!"

"This race on Wednesday will be a bit of a tough nut for you to crack."

"Not at all; I shall be all wight."

"But I'm rather anxious about you, Gussy," said Blake. "You remember when we were staying at the Quarry Farm only a few days ago, you told us you were on the verge of a serious illness."

"My stay in the countwy quite cured me."

Jack Blake shook his head solemnly.

"That's all very well, Gussy. I know it's a good wheeze for an invalid to take an optimistic view of his condition; but I can't feel so easy about it as you do."

"My dear fellow," said D'Arcy, rather flattered by Blake's unusual solicitude for his health, "I assure you that I am as wight as wain."

"I know you're game, Gussy, but think what we should feel like if anything happened to you," said Blake pathetically. "It won't do, Gussy. I've got a feeling that you're not up to this ride on Wednesday."

"But I am committed to it now, deah boy."

"Not at all."

"My dear Blake; I am bound to wide or eat my words, and it is absolutely imposs. for a D'Arcy evah to do anythin' like that."

"Oh, there's an alternative, of course!" said Blake. "You could find a substitute."

Arthur Augustus caught his chum's drift, and he began to glare. Jack Blake went on unheeding.

"You see, Gussy, as a Yorkshireman, I know all there is to be known about horses, or a little more, and I've ridden 'cross country at home in Yorkshire in places that would make your head swim——"

"I wefuse to believe anythin' of the sort."

"It's the horse that counts in a steeplechase, of course. It's Badger against Algarotti's black. The jockey up doesn't matter."

"I assure you that it mattahs vewy much. Algawotti had the feahful impertinence to hint that I was not a good widah."

"I'll put him in his place."

"No, you won't Blake."

"I'll make him sing small."

"You will do nothing of the sort."

"Now, look here, Gussy——"

"I am goin' to wide on Wednesday, deah boy, and it's not the slightest use your talkin'," said the swell of the School House placidly.

"I suppose that's what you call playing the game?" said Blake, more in sorrow than in anger. "You're not fit to ride 'cross country, and I thought that this was a time for your friends to rally round you, and—— What are you grinning at, you image?"

"Oh, nothin', deah boy! My fwiends can wally wound and see me win if they like."

"See you get your neck broken more likely."

"Well, I am goin' to wisk it."

And Arthur Augustus strolled out of the School House, leaving Blake looking after him very expressively. Reilly of the Fourth was sitting on the stone balustrade of the School House steps, kicking his heels against the pillars; but he jumped down as the swell of the school came out.

"The top of the mornin' to ye!" he said agreeably.

Arthur Augustus surveyed him a little doubtfully. There was a certain antagonism between the swell of St. Jim's and the boy from Belfast.

"Good mornin', deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Sure, and I wanted to speak to you," said Reilly. "I hear that you're riding in a steeplechase next Wednesday?"

"Perfectly cowwect."

"Sure, it will be a tough nut for you to crack intirely."

"Yaas, wathah; but I hope I shall pull it off, you know."

"Now, look here, D'Arcy," said Reilly confidentially; "at home, in ould Ireland, I do a lot of riding. I've got an uncle in Galway, and we ride to hounds, and go the divil's own pace over a country that would make an English fox-hunter weep."

"Do you weally?" said D'Arcy, with polite interest.

"Faith, we do! Now, I was thinking, Gussy, that it would be a good idea if you sent a substitute to this steeplechase, and sure you couldn't find a better one than—— Faith, and what are ye cackling at intirely?"

"Nothin', deah boy; only I don't want a substitute on Wednesday."

"Now, don't be after refusing out of sheer obstinacy, Gussy, darling," said Reilly persuasively. "Sure, I shouldn't like to see you brought home with a broken neck, and though we haven't been always on the best of terms——"

"As a mattah of fact, you have nevah weally tweated me with pwopah wespect," said Arthur Augustus, in his stateliest manner.

"Sure, and that was nothing but an oversight on my part; and in thruth, Gussy, I respect you very highly—faith, and I do."

"I am glad to hear it, Weilly."

"When I heard about this steeplechase," went on Reilly, "I said to myself, said I, 'I've never really treated D'Arcy with proper respect, but I'll turn over a new leaf intirely, and show him how fond I am of him, by carrying his colours

to the last flag.' I said to myself, 'This is a time for all D'Arcy's true friends to show themselves, and rally round him——' Faith, and what are ye cackling at again!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ye mathering gossoon——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Faith, and I tell you——"

"Weally, deah boy, I am not lookin' for a substitute, and I weally beg of you to dwop the subject," said Arthur Augustus, with a wave of the hand. And he walked down the steps and strolled across the quadrangle.

Figgins & Co. were taking a morning stroll, too, and D'Arcy gave them a polite greeting. There was pax for the time between School House and New House. The New House Co. had been discussing something very seriously, and Figgins coughed a little as he greeted D'Arcy.

"Fine morning, Gussy," he said slowly.

"Yaas, wathah; but the gwound is too wet for footah. There was wain in the night."

"Yes, that's unfortunate," said Figgins absently. Arthur Augustus looked slightly surprised. He was expecting Figgins to be indulging in anathemas both loud and deep against the climate. Snow had banished football for a long time, and now after a fine spell of weather there had been a rainfall. It was enough to exasperate the keenest footballer in the New House; but Figgins appeared just now to be thinking of something else.

"You're riding against that chap Algarotti on Wednesday," Figgins remarked thoughtfully, coughing again.

"Yaas, wathah! Widin' with him, anyway. I sha'n't wide against him unless he gets in the way," said Arthur Augustus.

Figgins laughed. The joke was a feeble one, and was of old standing, but Figgins laughed as though it was the finest bon mot that had ever been uttered within the walls of St. Jim's. D'Arcy looked pleased. His little efforts at humour were generally greeted with groans, or sometimes with flying books or boots.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked the Co., backing their leader up loyally.

"Oh, you funny dog!" gasped Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Kerr again.

"My aunt!" gasped Fatty Wynn. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yaas, I wegard that wemark as wathah funnay," said D'Arcy modestly. "I am vewy glad to see that you duffahs are cultivatin' a sense of humah."

"Ha, ha! But as I was saying, Gussy, you are riding in the steeplechase on Wednesday."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Do you feel quite fit, after the attack of influenza you had the other day?" asked Figgins anxiously.

"It wasn't influenza, af'ah all, deah boy, and I am as wight as wain," said D'Arcy, beginning to see Figgy's little game.

"But suppose you have a fall," said Figgins. "You may come a purler at the water-jump, for instance."

"I am goin' to wisk it."

"Oh, I know you have lots of pluck, Gussy, but what about your clothes? You would simply ruin them."

"Yaas, that would certainly be vewy howwid, but I must wisk it."

"Now, Gussy, I was saying to Kerr as you came up that the rows between the two Houses at this school are often carried too far. I was saying that, on a special occasion like this, the New House ought to play up, and show the School House that it regards St. Jim's as—as a harmonious whole."

"That's it," said Kerr gravely.

"I was saying to Kerr—or was it to you, Fatty—I was saying, anyway, that a fellow like you has as many friends in the New House as in the School House, and that this is a time for those friends to let the fact be seen, and to rally round you."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are you cackling at?"

"My dear Figgy, you are the fourth duffah that has offered to wally wound me."

"The fourth what?" exclaimed Figgins.

"The fourth duffah," said Arthur Augustus calmly. "Tom Mewwy was the first, and then Blake, and then Weilly, and now——"

"Of course, you were quite right in refusing them. You were quite right in waiting till a really good rider offered ——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But I say, really, Gussy——"

"Bai Jove, there's the bwekkah bell! So long, deah boys. When I am lookin' out for any substitutes, I will let you know."

And Arthur Augustus strolled off to the School House, leaving Figgins & Co. looking at one another expressively.

During morning school, Arthur Augustus received fifty lines for inattention in class, as well as a German imposition from Herr Schneider. But he cared little. He was thinking of the steeplechase, and of carrying the D'Arcy colours in triumph to the final flag. Immediately after morning school he walked to Rylcombe, to take Badger out for a "twot," leaving his lines unwritten, and indeed forgotten. He had more important matters than impots to think about now.

CHAPTER 10.

Nicodemus Declines.

"JUMP on!"

"Wait a minute, Lowther, I'm quite out of breath."

"Oh, get on!"

"Are you sure he's quiet?"

"He's as quiet as Mary's little lamb."

"He seems to have rather a gleam in his eye."

"That's only a gleam of good-nature."

"Is it?" said Fatty Wynn doubtfully. And he looked at Farmer Hodges's donkey with a dubious eye.

Nicodemus, the donkey, was a well-known figure in the fields round St. Jim's, and more than one fellow had tried to ride him, with painful results to the would-be rider. Nicodemus looked very quiet and sedate, but when he felt anyone on his back, his manners and customs underwent a great change.

The ground was not fit for football that afternoon, and the Terrible Three had gone for a stroll instead, and as they passed the old barn, they had come upon the donkey, looking for thistles with a thoughtful expression on his face. Fatty Wynn had just come out of the barn, with a self-conscious look and a smear of jam on his plump countenance. It was Monty Lowther who suggested that the fat Fourth-Former might like a ride. Fatty Wynn liked the idea well enough, but he did not quite like the look of Nicodemus.

"Why don't you ride him?" he asked suddenly.

Lowther yawned.

"Oh, I don't want to ride this afternoon. Besides, you're just the weight. Nicky would be frisky under a light weight like me, but I'd defy a rhinoceros to be frisky if he got your weight across him."

"I say, wait a minute till I get my camera," exclaimed Manners.

"Bosh! Jump on, Fatty, and I'll hold his head."

"Pongo! Fetch him!" cried Wally, and Pongo was after the rat like a shot.

"Well, I should like a canter, to give me an appetite for tea," Fatty Wynn remarked. "I haven't had anything to eat since three o'clock, and I'm getting pretty peckish, but——"

"Are you going to jump on?"

"Here he is!" exclaimed a lively voice, and three youthful figures rushed round the barn—D'Arcy minor, Jameson, and Gibson, of the Third Form.

"Run along, kids," said Tom Merry; "no room for fags."

"Rats!" said Wally cheerfully. "We came here to look for one donkey, and we've found five. Four of you can bunk; we want Nicodemus."

And Jameson and Gibson grinned gleefully. They always enjoyed Wally's cool "cheek" to fellows in higher Forms, though they seldom quite ventured to imitate it themselves.

The chums of the Shell turned pink. Monty Lowther gave the hero of the Third a warning look.

"'Nuff said!" he exclaimed. "Stand out of the way, you kids. Fatty is going to give us an exhibition of riding, and with the world with noble horsemanship, as Shakespeare remarks. Go ahead, Fatty!"

"Sure you've got his head?"

"Yes, rather, safe as houses."

"Give me a bunk up, Merry."

"Right you are."

Tom Merry gave the required bunk, and Fatty Wynn clambered on the back of the donkey. The Third-Formers stood by grinning. Wally picked up a stick from the grass, and winked at Jameson, who nearly exploded.

"Feel safe?" asked Lowther.

"Ye-es. Don't let go for a minute, though," said Fatty Wynn anxiously. "Wait till I get hold of the rope. Blessed if I know how a chap's to ride without reins. I can manage in a minute, though. I'll have a canter round the field."

"Better jump the gate."

"I don't know how this moke shapes as a jumper."

"Now, look here, Fatty, don't funk it," said Lowther. "There's Gussy, a Fourth-Former belonging to our House, who is riding a steeplechase. I should think even a New House fellow could take a gate."

"Bosh!" said Fatty, on his mettle at once. "I'll take the gate."

"That's right. Good old Fatty! Ready?"

"Ye-e-e-e-es."

Lowther let go, and Fatty Wynn was left alone on Nicodemus. Nicodemus had a wicked look in his eyes, but he seemed very quiet. Fatty, gaining courage, gave him a punch on the neck.

"Here, get on, you brute! Buck up!" he exclaimed.

The donkey trotted off. Fatty Wynn dragged on the rope to drag him round towards the gate, and Nicodemus obeyed with the gentleness of the cooing dove. The chums of the Shell looked on in amazement.

"My only hat!" murmured Lowther. "I never believed Fatty could handle the moke. Why, he's as quiet as Badger was after Gussy rode him."

D'Arcy minor gave a chuckle.

"Nicky is looking wicked about the eyes," he murmured. "He only wants to be woke up. I'm going to wake him."

And Wally gave the donkey a smack across the flank; not enough to hurt him, but enough to make him lively. Wally knew Nicodemus. The donkey suddenly broke into a burst of speed, and dashed towards the gate helter-skelter.

"Oh!" yelled Fatty Wynn. "Help!"

"Stick to him!" shouted Lowther. "Sit tight!"

Wynn had heaps of pluck. He sat tight, and brought the carcering donkey up to the gate.

Right up to the gate went Nicodemus with a rush. But there, unfortunately, he refused to leap. His head went down, and his hind legs went up, and Fatty Wynn, with a wild yell, shot forward over his ears.

"Look out!" shouted Tom Merry.

But it wasn't of much use warning Fatty Wynn to look out. He was flying over the head of the donkey and over the gate. He bumped down in a sitting posture in a bed of ferns, and gasped.

Nicodemus looked at him through the gate with a benignant expression, as if quite unconscious of having done anything amiss.

The juniors were roaring with laughter, as much at the expression on Fatty Wynn's plump face as anything else.

"My word!" gasped Fatty Wynn. "The—the beast! I—I think I've broken my back."

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Lowther. "You would be sitting up and talking if you had broken your back, of course."

"I—I feel jarred all over."

Tom Merry vaulted over the gate, and gave Fatty a hand up. On examination, the fat Fourth-Former found that nothing was broken. He gasped for breath, and gave Lowther a reproachful look.

"I believe you knew the beast was going to act like that, Lowther."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It has made me quite hungry. A shock to the system always makes me hungry, and tea won't be ready for nearly half an hour yet," said Fatty Wynn pathetically.

Tom Merry slipped his arm through that of the fat Fourth-Former.

"Come and have a look-in at the tuckshop," he said.

The New House Falstaff beamed at once.

"Right you are, Merry! Of course, it was only Lowther's little joke, and I'm not the fellow to bear a grudge for a joke."

"Not to the extent of refusing a feed," grinned Lowther.

And the chums of the Shell marched Fatty Wynn off to solace him in the best possible way for his fall. Wally chuckled gleefully.

"Now we can have a ride," he remarked. "Come on, Nicky! Hold on to his back legs, Jimmy."

"No fear!" said Jameson promptly.

"Oh, don't be an ass! Come on, Nicky, old son. Come here, you obstinate beast!"

Nicodemus was dodging. But Wally soon caught him, and vaulted on his back. Wally could ride anything that went on four legs, and Nicodemus in vain attempted to play on him the same trick that had unseated Fatty Wynn.

In a few minutes Wally was careering round and round the field, with Jameson and Gibson yelling to urge the moke to greater efforts. The entertainment ending all of a sudden when a stout farmer, with a wrathful brow and a big stick, was observed making his way to the scene.

CHAPTER 11.

Arthur Augustus Does Not Forget His Friends.

"D'ARCY!"

"Yaas, sir," said Arthur Augustus, stopping as Mr. Railton spoke to him in the passage in the School House on Monday morning.

"Dr. Holmes wishes to see you in his study."

"Yaas, sir."

On most occasions such a summons would have been received with a sinking of the heart. It did not usually end pleasantly for a junior to be called into the Head's study. But D'Arcy guessed that the present summons had to do with the steeplechase fixed for Wednesday, and he went to the dread sanctum with a light heart and a sprightly step.

"Come in, D'Arcy," said the Head kindly. "I have a few words to say to you before school. I have had a letter from Lord Eastwood, making a somewhat unusual request, which, however, I fully intend to grant."

D'Arcy's eyes danced with pleasure and relief.

"Thank you vewy much, sir!"

"It appears that his lordship wishes you to ride in a steeplechase on Wednesday," went on the Head, looking curiously at Arthur Augustus. "I did not know you were a rider, D'Arcy."

"I have widden evah since I was a little nippah, sir."

"Very good. I presume that Lord Eastwood knows your capabilities in the matter, and he takes all responsibility. You will require to leave here early on Wednesday morning, and go to Cleveland Lodge, as Lord Eastwood tells me that the course has been marked out in the Tytchley country. You have my permission to go, D'Arcy, and I wish you every success."

"You are vewy kind, sir. I felt sure I could depend upon your genewosity," said the junior gratefully.

"Indeed, I am glad to encourage anything of the kind," said the Head. "Riding is a healthy and manly exercise, and it is very pleasant to see a boy fond of horses. Of course, I need not say that I rely upon you not to get mixed up in any betting transactions."

"Yaas, wathah, sir."

"I think that is all, D'Arcy."

"Pway excuse me, sir, but—but——" Arthur Augustus hesitated, and the Head looked at him inquiringly.

"Go on, D'Arcy. Have you something to ask of me?"

"I don't know whethah I ought to twespass furthah on your kindness, sir," said the swell of St. Jim's diffidently. "I don't want you to think me a gwaspin' sort of boundah, sir."

The doctor smiled.

"You may be sure that I shall not think that, D'Arcy, whether I grant your request or not. What is it?"

"I awwanged the wace for Wednesday, sir, because it is a half-holiday, and I wished my fwiends to come ovah and see the finish."

"Very good. They shall have passes out of bounds for the purpose, certainly."

"Thank you vewy much, sir. But could you manage to let them get off a little earliah on Wednesday, so that they could see the start, sir?"

Dr. Holmes looked grave.

"I am afraid that is asking a great deal, D'Arcy."

"I know it is, sir, and I feel wathah like a boundah in askin' so much; but they would like to come awfully, and so——"

"Well, well, we will see. I suppose you are alluding to Blake, Herries, and Digby, who share your study?"

"Yaas, sir. But in ordah to give the Shell a show, pewwaps you could let Tom Mewwy and Mannahs and Lowthah come as well?"

"I will think of it."

"And—and in case the New House felt wathah wotten about it, sir, pewwaps you could give your permish to Figgins & Co.—I mean Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn, sir."

"Anyone else?" asked the Head slightly sarcastically. D'Arcy, who did not notice the sarcasm, brightened up, and went on cheerfully:

"Yaas, sir, now you speak of it, I should like to take my young bwothah—D'Arcy minor, you know. He's a young scallywag, but he'd like to come."

"I really hope that is the whole list, D'Arcy."

"Yaas, sir. If they left St. Jim's at eleven in the mornin', they would be in time for the start, comin' ovah to Tytchley by twain."

"As a matter of fact, Lord Eastwood made some reference to your friends in his letter," said the Head. "It happens that all the juniors you name have very good reputations as workers in class—with, perhaps, the exception of D'Arcy minor. Upon the whole, I think I can grant your request, D'Arcy."

"Bai Jove, sir, I am awfully obliged, you know! I weally wish I could show my gwatitude in some way."

"Never mind that," said the Head, smiling. "Impress upon the others to keep on their good behaviour all the day, and tell them I rely upon them."

"I shall certainly do so, sir; and, as far as poss., I will keep an eye on them personally," said Arthur Augustus. And he wondered why the Head smiled as he went out of the study.

The Fourth were already in the class-room, and Arthur Augustus joined them there. His chums looked at him curiously. Arthur Augustus was beaming, and they guessed that he had received permission from the Head. But it was impossible to question him till after morning lessons. The moment the class was dismissed, and the Fourth Form poured out of the class-room, Blake, Herries, and Digby pounced upon the swell of the School House.

"Well, what's the giddy news?" demanded Blake.

"It's all wight, deah boy. I've got the permish of our wespected Head to go to Tytchley for the steeplechase."

"Good! Did you mention about us being allowed out of bounds to see the event?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"And what said the oracle?"

"He has given permish. for that, too. And you can leave St. Jim's in the mornin' wecess, at eleven o'clock, so as to be at the start," said Arthur Augustus, beaming.

Blake stared at him for a moment, and then seized him and fairly hugged him. He waltzed him round the passage to the great danger of passers-by. Arthur Augustus struggled in vain in the muscular grip of the Yorkshire boy.

"Blake, pway welease me! You are wuffling my waistcoat, and disawwangin' my beastly tie!" he gasped.

"Come to my arms," said Blake. "Let me weep on your bosom."

"I uttahly wefuse to let you do anythin' of the sort! Welease me! Oh!"

The "Oh!" was caused by Arthur Augustus crashing into a Shell fellow who was coming from his class-room. It was Gore, and Gore gave a yell as he staggered against the wall.

"You clumsy ass!" he roared.

"Weally, Goah, I am sowwy! It was the fault of this uttah ass!" panted D'Arcy. "He wefuses to welease me, and he is as stwong as a beastly horse!"

"You dummy!"

"I wefuse to be called a dummy! Blake, pway welease me, so that I can give Goah a thwashin' for his cheek!"

"Here, don't fill up the gangway!" exclaimed Figgins. "Moderate your transports, you duffers! What's the giddy row?"

"Oh, it's ripping!" said Blake, stopping his impromptu waltz at last, and setting the breathless D'Arcy against the wall with a bump. "Gussy has played up nobly, and I was showing my gratitude."

"I weally wish you would find a less wuff and wotten way of showin' your gwatitude, deah boy."

"We've got permission to go and see the start of the steeplechase," grinned Blake. "What do you think of that, Figgy? And Gussy did it—alone he did it, as Coriolanus remarks."

"Yaas, wathah! I put it to him as an old sport, you know."

"Good!" said Figgins. "I'm glad! But I wish Gussy had thought of us."

"So I did, Figgy. I've got permish. for you, too—you and the Co."

"My hat," yelled Figgins, "that's ripping! I must waltz you round again, Willy."

"I wefuse to be waltzed wound again, and if you appwoach me I shall stwike you with violence, Figgins. I am quite out of bweath as it is."

"All of us?" grinned Figgins. "Gussy, you're a little genius! I'll never knock your silk topper off again as long as I live—perhaps."

"Weally, Figgins——"

"Jolly for you," broke in Tom Merry's voice; "but what price us? Gussy, have you forgotten your uncle?"

"You are not my uncle, Tom Mewwy, and I wegard the expwession as widiculous. But I have not forgotten you."

"You don't mean to say that you have permission for the lot of us?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Come to my arms——"

"Wats! I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort, and if you wowwy me like that ass Blake, I shall lose my tempah and stwike you."

"We'll make a giddy party of it!" said Tom Merry gleefully. "Why, it will be ripping! We'll see you have fair play, Gussy!"

"I am goin' to take young Wally, too," said D'Arcy. "I twust you fellows will behave yourselves. I have, in fact, pwactically given my word for you to the doctah. I have pwomised him to keep an eye on you personally as far as poss, but, of course, you will be out of my sight duwin' the steeplechase. I wely on you to keep ordah just as if I were with you."

And the juniors, with solemn and serious faces, refrained from bumping Gussy down on his neck, and promised, almost with tears in their eyes, that they would keep ordah.

CHAPTER 12.

The Steeplechase.

WEDNESDAY was looked forward to keenly by all the juniors concerned. On every possible occasion in the interval Arthur Augustus took Badger out for a trot, putting him to the roughest ground and the stiffest fences he could find in the neighbourhood of St. Jim's.

Badger answered all his expectations fully. He was amenable to the lightest touch of D'Arcy's hand, and he took fences, hedges, and ditches with equal unconcern. The steeplechase at Tytchley was to be over a four-mile course, and Captain Cleveland had written to his cousin that it was marked over a rough hunting country. But Arthur Augustus was in good condition, and so was Badger, and the schoolboy jockey was confident. So was Mr. Jones, in Rylcombe, and so were Dick, the groom, and Bob, the stableman.

The horsey trio intended to be on the ground for the steeplechase, to see the performance of Badger with a schoolboy up, and they had no doubt that Badger would pull off the purse. They had not seen his adversaries, but they had confidence in the horse and its rider.

The original contest between D'Arcy and young Algarotti was extended. Three other horses were entered, and a sweep of a sovereign apiece was arranged, to which Lord Eastwood had added ten guineas. D'Arcy was glad to hear of the other entries. As he confided to Blake, he regarded Algarotti as a wank wottah, and thought it was beneath his dig. to wide with him. The presence of other contestants made it less of a personal affair.

"All the same, I am goin' to give him a feahful lickin'," said D'Arcy. "I weally don't want to bwag, deah boys, but when it comes to widin' acwoss countwy, I weally think I know the pwopah thing to do. Yaas, wathah!"

One of the most gratifying features of the affair, to Arthur Augustus, was the new respect he received from Wally. Wally listened to lectures on inky fingers and untidy neckties on several occasions, without even saying "rats!" And he was really grateful for the permission obtained for him to to attend the steeplechase. He even went so far as to promise to put on a clean collar, and keep it clean.

"I have hopes of that young scallywag, yet," Arthur Augustus confided to Tom Merry. "I have seen him twice this week with his necktie stwaight."

"Who said the age of miracles was past?" asked Tom Merry solemnly.

"It is a gweat change for Wally, you know; and I am weally glad to see it. I hope, in the course of time, to imbue the young wascal with a pwopah wegard for dwess."

Wednesday dawned at last, and Jack Blake was the first to hop out of bed in the Fourth Form dormitory in the School House, and to look out of the window at the weather.

"Ripping morning," he announced. "Cold, if you like, but dry and hard. There won't be any rain, and that's a stroke of luck."

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy, as he turned out. "I should weally be extwemely disappointed if it wained. Of course, it wouldn't make any diffewence to me, only I want to win if poss, without spoilin' my clothes."

"Are you going to put your colours on here?" asked Digby, with interest.

Arthur Augustus shook his head.

"No, I shall change at my cousin's house. The wace starts a hundwed yards fwom Cleveland Lodge. Pway be there as early as you can, deah boys, and you'll see me at the startin' flag in the D'Arcy colours. You'll know me by the blue and white sleeves. Bai Jove! you know, I am feelin' quite in a fluttah."

Jack Blake looked at him anxiously.

"Not feeling fit, old son?"

"Oh, yaas, I'm fit enough, Blake."

"It's not too late for carrying out that suggestion, you know. You could send a substitute, and I should be only too willing——"

"Wats!" said Arthur Augustus.

After breakfast, Arthur Augustus took leave of his chums. They went down to the gate with him, and gave him a cheer as he departed. The swell of St. Jim's walked down to Rylcombe, where he found Mr. Jones, Dick, and Bob already at the railway-station to catch the same train to Tytchley. Badger had been taken over the previous evening, and left in Captain Cleveland's stables.

There was nothing snobbish about D'Arcy, and he was glad of the company of the horsey three on the way to Tytchley. He talked horses with them all the way, and incidentally showed a knowledge of the ways and qualities of the noble animal that raised him still further in their estimation. Meanwhile, the morning hours were passing slowly enough at St. Jim's.

It was a glorious day for a steeplechase, and the juniors were looking forward keenly to their holiday. Early lessons were over at last, and when the Forms came out for the morning respite, Tom Merry & Co. did not go in again with the rest. They donned coats and caps, and made for the gates. Herries, of course, wanted to take his bulldog, but Towser was voted unanimously as being too much trouble. The juniors wanted to get as close to the course as possible and see all they could of the race, and for once Herries consented to leave his favourite behind. But D'Arcy minor was made of sterner stuff. He came along to the gates with Pongo yapping at his heels.

"Well, of all the cheek!" exclaimed Herries. "I'm not taking Towser, and now this kid trots out his rotten mongrel."

"Rotten!" said Figgins. "I've left Spot behind, too. Take that brute back, Wally! He won't be allowed anywhere near the course."

"Can't help that," said Wally. "I'm not going to leave old Pongo behind!"

"Cheeky young beggar!"

"Look here; I don't see what you want to be down on a nice, quiet, harmless animal like this for," growled Wally. "I'll tie him up at Cleveland Lodge, and what more can you want?"

"Well, if you tie him up there, it's all right," said Tom Merry. "Let him have the brute, kids! After all, they're a pair, and it would be cruelty to separate them."

And Wally triumphantly brought his cur along.

It was a short railway run to Tytchley Station, in the heart of the hunting country. Tom Merry & Co. walked from the station. Some of them knew the ground, and, anyway, they would not long have been in doubt, for great numbers of country people were going to see the steeplechase, and the lanes seemed to be full of them. Not only at the starting-point, but here and there along the course,

the folks from the countryside had assembled, and at the finish—where a water-jump lay in wait for the bold riders that was likely to tax all their nerve—the crowd was greater than at the starting-point, on foot, on horseback, and in all kinds of vehicles. Tom Merry & Co. caught the prevailing excitement as they came along, and they arrived in sight of Cleveland Lodge at last. The crowd at the start caught their eyes, and they hastened thither.

"Bai Jove! here you are then, deah boys."

Arthur Augustus, looking very handsome in a covert coat that, like everything else he wore, was the triumph of the art sartorial, was standing beside Cousin Ethel's horse, holding Badger by the bridle, while he chatted with his cousin. Captain Cleveland was there on horseback also. He gave the boys a grin and a genial nod, and Cousin Ethel bestowed her sweetest smile upon them.

Figgins coloured as he raised his cap. He always coloured, somehow, when he met Cousin Ethel.

"I am so glad to see you all here," said Cousin Ethel. "I thought Wally was coming, too."

"Well, he's here," said Tom Merry. "Wally! Why he's gone!"

"It's that mongrel of his," said Kerr. "He bolted after a bird in the last wood."

Cousin Ethel looked anxious.

"I hope he will not get into any trouble," she said. "The preserves in this district are very carefully watched."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Oh, Pongo will take care of himself," he said; "and as for young Wally, he always falls on his feet. What a ripping day for a ride, Cousin Ethel."

"Yes; isn't it?"

"I wish we could have come mounted. But we haven't any steeds, except Wynn, and he left his behind."

Fatty Wynn coloured at the allusion to Nicodemus. Captain Cleveland uttered an exclamation.

"Here they come!"

Algarotti walked his horse up to the starting-point. The big black was looking in splendid condition, and Algarotti, with a coat over his colours, looked very fit. There came a flash into his dark eyes as he saw D'Arcy, but he nodded, and lifted his cap politely to Miss Cleveland.

Three other contestants came up, one of them a young farmer of the neighbourhood, one a young man from London, and the third a gentleman rider, well-known in the neighbourhood, and whose appearance was greeted by a murmur of cheering.

There was a stir in the crowd, now. Arthur Augustus greeted his rivals cheerily enough, but did not speak to Algarotti. The Italian was in a morose mood. Perhaps he was not so certain of winning now as he had been when he made the match. The small sum at stake was nothing to him. But the Italian had set his heart on lowering D'Arcy's colours, and victory or defeat meant everything to him; and a keen judge of physiognomy would not have doubted, from a close look at Algarotti's face, that he would rather have won by foul play than have lost. He was not the fellow to allow scruples to stand in the way of winning, and sport in the English sense of the word was an unknown quantity to him.

Arthur Augustus slipped off his coat, and threw it to Tom Merry, and the chums of St. Jim's looked in great admiration at the School House swell. He made the finest possible figure in the D'Arcy racing colours—blue and white, with blue cap and a silver tassel. His riding breeches were of the shapeliest cut, and his boots seemed to fit him like gloves.

"My word," said Digby, "he ought to be shoved into a glass case just as he stands."

"Oh, weally, Dig!"

"Hold on a minute!" said Manners, producing a mysterious looking case from under his coat. "I want to snap you."

And before Arthur Augustus could speak he was snapped, and the image of him reposed safely on the film in Manners's camera. And he was snapped thrice again, the last time when he was mounted on Badger ready for the start. Manners closed his pocket camera, and put it away with much satisfaction.

"We'll have 'em framed, and you chaps shall have one to hang up in No. 6," he said, in a burst of generosity.

"What-ho!" said Blake. "Look-out! They're starting."

Every eye was fixed on the steeplechasers.

A fine set they looked at the same, and as the flag fell they got away in good style, and the race began!

"Go it, Gussy!"

"Buck up for St. Jim's!"

But Arthur Augustus did not hear. He was off like a shot, and all his attention was given to his steed and the country before him.

The course was a four-mile one, and a little over, over a "fair hunting country," but hunting country of a rough and difficult description. The ground was partly pasture and partly under plough. The hedges were high and frequent, the ditches deep and ditto, and here and there were stone walls, which added to the difficulty of the course. It was no ride for dandy horsemen—only the real stuff could hope to pull through. The water-jump at the end was a tough one, with hedge, rail, and wide water, and after that was the winning-post. The course being arranged in three-parts of a circle, the winning-post was a very short distance from the starting-point, and as soon as the horsemen were fairly off, most of the crowd streamed across to see the finish.

Cousin Ethel and her brother, and many friends on horseback, rode over, while the juniors of St. Jim's mostly dispersed to see the race from various points.

CHAPTER 13.

How Pongo Saved the Race!

"PONGO! Good doggie! Pongo!"

Wally called out the name of his favourite entreatingly. But Pongo refused to listen to the voice of the charmer.

D'Arcy minor was growing exasperated with his favourite. He was keenly anxious to see the race, and Pongo was delaying him. Worse than that, the dog had bolted into the preserves near the lodge, and was evidently stalking game when Wally pursued him. He escaped in the underbrush, and when Wally caught sight of him again he was sneaking off with a fat bird between his jaws.

Wally called and whistled in vain, and he was afraid to call and whistle too loudly, lest he should bring a keeper to the spot. He was in forbidden ground, and he knew how a keeper would be likely to regard the presence of a boy and a dog in one of the strictest preserves in the county. Pongo was liable to be shot at sight, and, doubtless, would have deserved it, too; but that would be very little consolation to Wally, especially if he himself were arrested into the bargain.

"Pongo! Good doggie! You rotten little beast, I'll have the hide off you for this! I'll skin you! Come on, old dog! Pongo, dear! I'll cut you into little bits when I catch you! Come on, old Pongo!"

But entreaty and threat alike were in vain. Wally made a

sudden rush, and Pongo skipped out of the wood, and ran down the bank of a stream with his prize. Wally, fearing that he would take to the water, ran faster, and Pongo plunged in.

"Pongo, come back!"

Wally heard a rustle in the wood behind him, and guessed that it was made by a gamekeeper. He hurried after the dog. The water in the woodland stream was shallow enough for wading. It was cold, but it was no time to think of that. Wally waded in, and followed the poacher across the rocky bed of the stream.

Pongo kept the corner of one eye on his master. Wally called to him in a subdued voice, but the mongrel waded on, and Wally waded after him.

Pongo dragged himself out of the water on the opposite side, and gave himself a shake. He seemed surprised to see Wally close at hand, and set off again, squirming under a fence. Wally was over the top of the fence in a twinkling, accelerated by the sound of a gruff voice shouting to him from the wood. He knew that he had had a narrow escape, but the vagaries of Pongo were not finished yet. The dog crept on, dodged through a hedge, and broke into a run across a field as Wally quickened his pace. He disappeared at a gap in a fence or the edge of a plantation, and Wally was at fault. The dog was very quiet, and whether he had run on, or dodged among the ditches and hedges, Wally was not sure.

The junior snapped his teeth. His wet trousers were clinging about his legs, and he was shivering from the contact, and more than half inclined to give up the chase of Pongo, and get off for the starting-point of the steeplechase. He knew that the time of starting must be close, if it had not already passed. Faintly, in the distance, he could hear the shouting of a crowd, but could not make out what it implied.

"Pongo!" he whispered. "Old Pongo!"

But the dog gave no sound. Wally knew him of old, and he knew that the mongrel was probably lying hidden in the ferns, almost within reach of his hand, and as still as a mouse.

The junior became silent. He crept cautiously along beside a hedge, keeping as much in cover as possible, and making no sound. His only chance was to spot Pongo and catch him napping, devouring the poached bird. He breathed dire threats of what he would do when he caught him—threats which he never carried out.

"My only Aunt Jane!" murmured Wally suddenly.

He had caught sight of something as he crept along the ditch. It was a flag, fluttering within a dozen yards of him. He stopped short, with an inaudible whistle. He knew that he had inadvertently crept close to the course followed by the steeplechasers.

He glanced at his watch. It was time for the start, unless there had been delay. He remained where he was, resolved to see the steeplechase from this favourable spot, and attend to Pongo afterwards. Round him the woods and the fields were silent and still; close at hand the fields intersected by hedges and ditches; further off the woods and the hills. A murmur of a great crowd in the distance only broke the silence. Wally wondered when the horsemen would come thundering by. Already he thought he could hear the patter and thud of hoofs on the soil.

He gave a sudden start. A nearer sound had come to his ears. It was a human voice, within a few yards of him in the dusk of the hedges.

"They've started!"

Another sightseer on the same spot! Wally wondered what had made him so quiet. But the next words he heard made his heart leap. It was no mere sightseer who was crouching there unseen among the ferns of the dry ditch.

"Are yer ready, Ikey? Mind, it's the bloke with the blue and white!"

"I know 'im, Dodger—young D'Arcy."

"That's 'im!"

"I s'pose," said Ikey, with a slight chuckle, "that if some of the others get it, it won't matter to our man?"

"Mind you don't hinder Algarotti, that's all."

"Phew! No."

Wally's teeth came together hard, and his eyes blazed. Arthur Augustus had told him something of his opinion of Algarotti; and anyway, the words of the two men hidden in the ditch could not be mistaken. They were there to foul D'Arcy—to make him lose the race! Algarotti was not trusting to his steed or to his luck. Like the coward and villain he was, he wanted to make all sure.

"My only Aunt Jane!"

Silently, cautiously, Wally crept closer to the speakers. His training in stalking the elusive Pongo stood him in good stead now. The scoundrels were there to baulk his brother in the ride, and Wally would have allowed himself to be cut to pieces rather than allow them to succeed.

The rascals had well chosen the spot for their ambush. It was more than half-way along the course, in the most difficult bit of country the riders had to cross, and no other sightseers were at hand.

A thick hedge of the bullfinch variety barred the course, with a ditch on the further side, and timber spotting it along its length for some distance. There was only one spot where the horsemen could leap, and at that spot two scoundrels were crouching up close to the hedge. The horses might leap right over them, but could not land close enough to hurt them. After the villainous deed they contemplated was accomplished, an easy way of escape lay by creeping along the ditch and scuttling into the neighbouring plantation.

Wally, peering through the masses of ferns that grew up close to the hedge, spotted the two rascals, who were listening intently for the beat of approaching hoofs. They could see the course leading up to the hedge through an interstice in the thicket, and Wally caught a glimpse of it, too, through the opening. There was a flash of hoofs and coloured silk in the sun.

"They're coming!"

They certainly were coming. The thud of the horses' hoofs rang on the ground, and through the narrow slit in the hedge could be seen five riders coming on in gallant style—Algarotti in the lead, a sturdy young farmer next, D'Arcy third, and two more riders behind.

"He's third, Dodger!"

"I see 'im, Ikey."

"Our man's leadin'. Wait till he's past, and the next, and then——"

"Right you is!"

The scoundrels crouched close and waited. Wally's heart was beating wildly. He saw that they held something in their hands, and there was the sputter of a fuse in the deep ditch. He guessed what it was with almost whirling brain. Each of the wretches had a cracker in his hand—an explosive of the kind used in Fifth of November celebrations, but very much larger, and of the repeating variety. Such an explosive, hurled at a horse suddenly from the ditch, would be certain to scare it almost out of its wits, and would render the rider's chance of winning the race nil. If those crackers were flung at Badger, Arthur Augustus was done for, so far as winning the steeplechase was concerned, even if he were not thrown and injured, as might very possibly be the case.

Wally's heart was thumping like a hammer. What was he to do? He had less than a minute to decide in—time was counted by seconds now. What was he to do?

To spring up and show himself, right in the path of the horses, even if he were not ridden down, his action would not be understood. The race would be delayed, but the outrage would not be prevented.

There was only one thing to do, and Wally did it. He waited with beating heart till the horsemen were close up to the hedge, and the crouching scoundrels were preparing for the foul deed. Then, with a sharp, almost hysterical cry, the youngster threw himself upon them.

The attack came wholly unexpectedly to the two ruffians. Wally threw an arm around each of them, and the three rolled into the bottom of the ditch, into beds of nettles and thistles, together. Wally was scratched and torn, but he was too excited to feel the pain. If only he saved the race for D'Arcy!

The two ruffians were gasping out amazed curses, utterly astounded by the attack. They squirmed in the nettles at the bottom of the ditch, and Wally clutched them frantically, furiously. A horseman rose into view from the other side of the hedge, and crossed hedge and ditch, thundering down on the turf clear of the obstruction. It was Algarotti on the big black.

After him came the farmer and D'Arcy, riding almost neck and neck, and they thundered down on the turf and dashed on without a pause.

Each of the riders was vaguely conscious of some kind of a struggle going on in the ditch under the shadow of the hedge, but it was no time to look round. They were riding to win.

Fast behind came the last two riders. They cleared hedge and ditch, and dashed on, a couple of lengths behind the swell of St. Jim's.

It had all lasted only a couple of seconds. The ruffians in the ditch were still struggling with Wally, with one another, and the nettles, hardly knowing yet what was happening. There was a sudden explosion in the nettles.

Bang!

It was followed by a shriek of agony from Ikey. The firework had exploded in his hand. In the scramble he had unconsciously tightened his grip on it, and the explosion had almost shattered his hand. The wretch crawled out of the ditch, moaning with pain, and sank down in the grass.

Wally tore himself loose. The fireworks were dropped in the ditch, and cracking away like pistol-shots in the nettles. Dodger squirmed out of the ditch and glared at the junior, and Wally dodged quickly enough out of his reach.

"You hounds!" cried the boy. "I've stopped you this time!"

He had stopped them indeed. The steeplechasers were already a field's length away, and the dastards had no further chance of interfering with the race.

Ikey was sitting in the grass, nursing his injured hand and moaning. Dodger glared at Wally with a face convulsed with rage. But the explosions were drawing people to the spot, and the ruffian dared not attempt vengeance. He slunk away and made his escape, and Ikey, in mortal fear of being seized, followed him more slowly, still moaning with the pain of his hand.

A dog crawled out of the ditch and licked Wally's hand.

"Pongo! You young rip! I've a good mind—— But, by Jove, it was you saved the race! Good dog!"

CHAPTER 14.
The Winner.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS was riding well—riding to win. For the first two or three fields Algarotti had kept well ahead of him, and the young farmer just behind Algarotti. D'Arcy was third, but D'Arcy knew what he was about

Badger was eager, keener on the run than his master, even, and D'Arcy had rather to hold him in than to urge him on.

Algarotti was taking more out of the big black than the circumstances of the race justified at so early a stage. Right up to the hedge where the ruffians had been baffled by Wally, Algarotti held an easy lead. But that hedge once behind, D'Arcy gave Badger a little more rope.

He passed the farmer inch by inch, and was seen to be an easy second, the farmer pounding on behind on his roan.

The two last were still riding hard, but a disinterested onlooker would not have given them much of a chance in the race.

Algarotti was nearly two lengths ahead of Badger and his rider, but D'Arcy's look was calm and confident.

He meant to win!

The hardest part of the struggle was ahead, and D'Arcy was saving his horse for it.

Badger crept closer and closer to the big black, but without the slightest sign of strain.

The Italian felt rather than heard the English lad drawing closer, and he brought the whip into play.

The lash drove on the big black to harder efforts, and he leaped away from Badger; but D'Arcy's pace never varied. He knew that a spurt was no good to his adversary at that point, and he did not trouble to reply to it.

The black slackened again, as he was bound to do, though the pace was still hot and thundering.

From various points on the course spectators watched the progress of the race, and loud shouts came on the wind.

"Buck up, Gussy!"

It was a yell from Jack Blake. But D'Arcy never heard it. His whole mind was wrapped up in horsemanship at that moment; he was in that mood when a man becomes, as it were, a part of his horse, and both creatures are moved by the same volition—the mood of a winner.

On, on, over stubble and grass, hedge and ditch, fence and wall! On, on, with the wind singing in his ears, his teeth hard set, his eyes agleam. Closer and closer to the black!

Badger's muzzle was level with the black's girths now, and still Arthur Augustus was not letting his mount make the burst he longed to make. But it was pretty plain that the black could never do much better than he was doing now.

Algarotti's face was black with rage and hate. He had heard the explosions, and had had little doubt that his hirelings had carried out his instructions, and that D'Arcy's mount had been scared off the course, or at least startled so much that it would be out of the running.

But the steed creeping up behind him told a different tale. Something had gone wrong with the plot; it had failed. What had happened was of no moment; it was enough to know that it had failed. And Algarotti set his teeth savagely. He would win yet, he inwardly swore. He would win by fair means, since foul had failed him, and cruelty should not be wanting to drive the gallant black to greater efforts.

On, on, on! Nearly neck and nesk now; and Algarotti, out of the corner of his eye, without looking back, could see the blue and white of the D'Arcy racing colours.

But still the red silk was in the lead—only by inches, but still in the lead. And those on the higher ground at the finish could see them now, and were shouting.

"Go it, St. Jim's!"

"Red wins!"

"Buck up, blue and white!"

Algarotti ground his teeth. The black and Badger took the same hurdle at the same moment; they were level now. Algarotti lashed his steed savagely. The black bounded on, and the Italian, with reckless unfairness, strove to edge D'Arcy off, at the risk of a purler for himself. But Arthur Augustus was quite aware of his little game, and on the watch for it.

The last obstacle was in sight now—a thick-set hedge, with a guard-rail, and beyond a wide water-jump. Beyond that, at a short distance, the finish, with a huge crowd waiting.

"They're level!" shouted Tom Merry.

"Neck and neck, by Jove!"

"Hurrah!"

"Buck up, St. Jim's!"

Cousin Ethel was watching from the back of her horse with shining eyes. She keenly wished for her cousin's victory. The way Algarotti was using the lash was enough to rouse the girl's bitter indignation, and was alone enough to deprive him of any sympathy. Captain Cleveland snapped his teeth on his cigar.

"Begad, the boy's winning!"

Badger was a nose ahead! The juniors of St. Jim's were in ecstasies. D'Arcy—old Gus—was winning; and when Blake gave Figgins a terrific thump on the back, Figgins only gasped and grinned, and passed it on to Lowther. Even Fatty Wynn forgot that he was hungry in the intense excitement.

Blue and white was winning! But was he, though? Not if a brute in human form could help it. With whip and spur Algarotti drove on his maddened horse; but with all of it he could not keep level. At the water-jump D'Arcy had the lead.

"The last lap!!" chuckled Jack Blake. "Oh, my hat! Fancy old Gus! I wouldn't have missed this for ten years' pocket-money in a lump."

D'Arcy was putting his beef into it now. The time had come for the grand effort he had been saving up, and he made it. He came down to the water-jump a streak of blue and white, and Badger, with scarcely a diminution of his pace, rose into the air in a grand leap.

"Ovah!"

And over rail and hedge and wide water went Badger—over, in a grand jump; and a second behind came Algarotti, with white face and glinting eyes, and his spurs cruelly scoring the flanks of his steed.

Right over, and D'Arcy dashed on, amid cheers. And then there was a yell, as Algarotti and the big black floundered in the water. The savage spurring had done it; the maddened horse had failed at the leap, and Algarotti's chance was gone.

Splash went the Italian and his horse, and over them leaped the others in turn, each making the jump successfully, though far behind the swell of St. Jim's.

There was a shout, swelling to a roar.

"Blue and white wins!"

And Arthur Augustus, three lengths ahead of the nearest competitor, dashed up to the last flag.

"Hurrah!"

"Blue and white wins!"

"Good old Gussy!"

"What-ho, St. Jim's!"

"Bai Jove, you know, that was quite a wun!" said Arthur Augustus, with perfect coolness. "Do you know, deah boys, I wathah thought I should win!"

CHAPTER 15.
D'Arcy's Triumph.

THEY dragged him from his steed, they slipped on his coat, and then they seized him forcibly and raised him on their shoulders. The swell of St. Jim's viewed the proceedings with some alarm at first. But he reflected that his clothes were pretty thoroughly splashed with mire already, and that a little more rumpling could not do much harm, and he resigned himself gracefully to his fate.

"Shoulder high!" roared Tom Merry.

"Shoulder 'igh!" shrieked Mr. Jones.

And up went the swell of St. Jim's, more than shoulder high. Men he had never seen before fought for the honour of lending a hand. A perfect stranger to him had his right leg, and Tom Merry his left. Dick, the groom, grasped him lower down the same leg, and Bob, the stableman, was bumping him behind. Mr. Jones clutched at his coat, and

Jack Blake and Figgins were supporting him somewhere. Round him country folk and friends and St. Jim's juniors were mingled in a cheering crowd.

The steeplechase had been one of the hardest ridden for a long time in the Tytchley district, and it had been won by the youngest contestant, a mere boy, a schoolboy jockey.

More than that, it had been won by fair and splendid horsemanship. D'Arcy had hardly flicked his steed once from start to finish.

Algarotti met with little sympathy. He crawled out of the water, drenched to the skin, and looking a good deal like a half-drowned rat, as the crowd marched past with Arthur Augustus. D'Arcy jammed his monocle into his right eye and looked at the miserable, baffled Italian. The swell of St. Jim's was a true sportsman, and there was nothing like malice in him.

"Pway halt a minute, deah boys, while I speak to Algawotti!" he exclaimed.

"Halt it is!" said Tom Merry.

"I say, Algawotti, old fellow, I'm sowwy you came that purlah, you know," said D'Arcy. "It was wathah wuff."

"Hang you!" muttered the Italian savagely. "If my confounded horse had not failed, you——"

"Yaas, it was wathah bad luck."

"You——"

"But it was a good wace," interrupted D'Arcy. "It weflects cwedit on all of us. Yaas; and you can gwin if you like, Monty Lowthah. I——"

"Don't talk to that foreign scum, Gus!"

"Hallo, Wally! Where have you been, and what do you mean by speakin' so wudely of my wespected opponent, Mr. Algawotti?"

"He's a scum," said Wally, "a dirty, sneaking, low-down scum, and that's what I've come here to tell him! He had two men hidden in a ditch to frighten your horse, and if Pongo hadn't led me there you would have been crocked for the race."

"What?"

Algarotti turned deadly pale. He knew that his plot had failed, but he had not expected an exposure. He turned quickly away, but an iron grip closed on his collar, and another on his shoulder, and he gasped with fear as he swung round and found himself staring at Dick, the groom, and Bob, the stableman.

"No you don't," said the stableman grimly.

"Let me go!" yelled Algarotti.

"Wait till the young gentleman has finished!"

"Look here, Wally!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Are you sure of what you are saying?"

"I shouldn't say it otherwise, Merry. I tell you I was following Pongo, and found two villains hiding in a ditch. They were talking over what they were going to do, and I found that they had been hired by Algarotti to throw fireworks at Gus's horse, when he had cleared the hedge, to frighten him and dish Gus. And they'd have done it if I hadn't jumped on 'em in time and stopped 'em."

"Bai Jove! now I wewembah, I heard fireworks goin' off at one spot, and there was a fight or somethin' in the ditch!" ejaculated D'Arcy.

"It is false!" exclaimed Algarotti. "I do not know them. I never——"

"You lying coward!" said Wally. "Your face is enough to give you away."

"There's not much doubt about it, I wathah think, gentlemen. You can wely on my young bwothah. I am extwemely obliged to you, Wally. Algawotti, I wegard you as the wottenest wottah that I evah came acwoss in all my expewience."

"Curse you!"

"I am afwaid I cannot stay here and listen to such extwemely coarse wemarks," said D'Arcy, with dignity. "Pway pwoceed."

"Let me go! I—— Help!"

"Duck him!"

"Scrag the welsher!"

"Chuck him in again!"

Algarotti struggled in wild terror in the grasp of the angry crowd. Dick, the groom, propelled him towards the water, and Bob helped from behind with liberal applications of a huge and heavy stable-boot. Others crowded round, poking and pommelling and shoving, and the Italian, almost in rags, shrieked and yelled for help and mercy.

"Pway desist, gentlemen!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, in great distress. "Don't duck the beastly wottah. Pway oblige me by lettin' him go!"

The word of the steeplechase winner was law, especially to Dick and Bob. They flung the Italian down.

"Right you are, sir!" said Bob.

The Italian picked himself up, and ran like a hare. He did not reappear to deny the story of his rascality. The Tytchley country saw no more of Algarotti.

And as he fled, the enthusiastic crowd bore the winner of the great steeplechase onward, amid cheers and howls and yells that made the welkin ring.

As Arthur Augustus afterwards remarked to Blake, it was really quite a "twiumph," and if he hadn't been a particularly modest chap he might "weally" have suffered from an attack of swelled head.

. . . . . .

But the ovation did not end at the winning-post. On the return to St. Jim's—whither the news had preceded him on the telegraph—Arthur Augustus D'Arcy found the whole school turned out to meet him.

School House and New House dropped their little differences for the sake of greeting the winner of the steeplechase, and Figgins & Co. and Tom Merry and his chums bore him shoulder-high through the crowd amid cheers and the waving of caps.

And, needless to say, Arthur Augustus "blued" his winnings in royal style. Mr. Jones was sufficiently rewarded by the reputation the victory brought to his horse, and, indeed, he would willingly have passed on a ten-pound note to D'Arcy, if there had been the slightest chance of his accepting it. But the sweep on the race there was no harm in D'Arcy accepting, as he had fairly won it by hard riding, and he expended it nobly in a feed that Fatty Wynn never forgot, and never will forget as long as he lives.

THE END.

Last Week of this Great Competition.

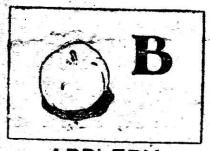
£50 In Cash Prizes.

First Prize—
£13 0 0: ONE POUND A WEEK FOR THIRTEEN WEEKS.

Second Prize—
£6 10 0: TEN SHILLINGS A WEEK FOR THIRTEEN WEEKS.

And 122 Cash Prizes at 5s. Each.

Specimen Picture.



APPLEBY.

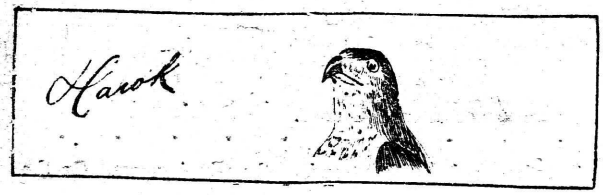
The First Prize will be awarded to the person who gets all or, failing this, most of the pictures right. The Second Prize will go to the reader nearest to the First Prize Winner, and so on. In the event of ties, the Prizes will be divided—that is to say, if two competitors tie for the first place, the first and second prizes will be divided between them, and so forth.

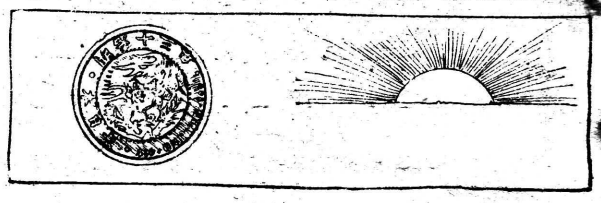
What Competitors have to do.—The Competition is very simple. We have published thirteen sets of Puzzle Pictures, each set consisting of six pictures. This is the last Set. Each of these pictures represents the **name of a well-known Association Football Player.**

All you have to do is to write carefully under each picture the name of the Player you think it represents—it is NOT necessary to add the name of the player's club. The Editor of the GEM LIBRARY will not be responsible for any loss or delay in transmission or delivery of the lists by post, nor for any accidental loss of a list after delivery. At the foot of this page you will find a form to be signed by each competitor, whereby he agrees to these conditions, and no list will be considered unless this form shall have been duly signed by the competitor. No questions will be answered. Read the rules. The Editor's decision is final.

The easiest way to solve the Pictures is to get the issue of "The Boys' Realm" now on sale, price 1d. During the last thirteen weeks "The Boys' Realm" has published a column of brief biographies of notable footballers, in which have been included all the names of the Players illustrated. Girls may compete. All competitors may get anyone to help them.

THE THIRTEENTH SET. ***You MUST fill in the Form Below.***





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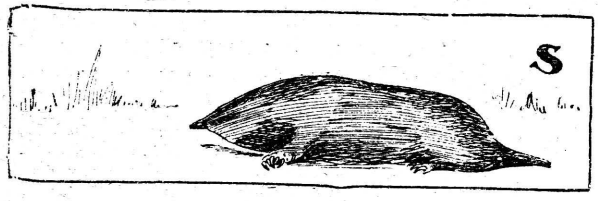

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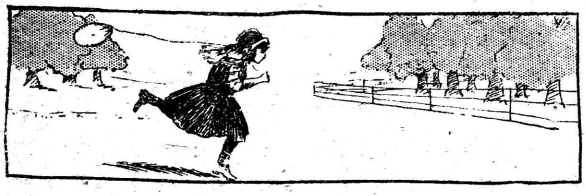

No. 83.....

No. 84.....

How to Send in Your Solutions.—The above is the last list. When you have solved the pictures, pin this and the previous sets together, with your name and address clearly written on the form below, and send to **The Competition Editor, "The Gem" Library, 23-29, Bouverie Street, Fleet Street, London, E.C.**

All lists must reach the above address by December 7th. Lists (unless from Colonial readers) delivered after that date will be disqualified!

Colonial competitors ONLY will be allowed a month after the closing date announced above for sending in their lists.

IF THIS FORM IS NOT FILLED IN YOU WILL BE DISQUALIFIED!

SPECIAL NOTE ☛ ***Picture No. 47 is Cancelled.***

I hereby agree to all the conditions governing "THE GEM" LIBRARY Puzzle Picture Competition as set forth in the rules above, and also that in the event of any dispute between myself and the Editor of "THE GEM" LIBRARY concerning this competition, the Editor's decision shall be binding on me.

Write Clearly.

*Name*_____

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Please tell your Friends about this Story.—Ed.

BRITAIN INVADED!

A Powerful and Stirring War Story.

THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

The Greyfriars School Cadet Corps, commanded by Captain Sam Villiers, scout, are standing about in small groups, talking anxiously, when the clattering of hoofs is heard, and a young farmer from one of the homesteads on the cliffs comes galloping in on a sweating horse, and reins up hastily.

"The furriners are on us!" he cries. "There's a whole fleet o' tugs an' barges an' ships o' war headin' in for Frinton Gap, wi' thousands o' men aboard! They're Germans, an' they're goin' to land!"

Captain Sam Villiers was at his side in a moment.

"How far off are they?"

"Four mile out when I left, an' comin' in fast. I seed the men aboard 'em wi' my owd telescope, an' the sun glintin' on their helmets; an' I've tried to send messages at the telegraph-offices, but none can't get through. They tells me all the wires is cut. Let me go! I must push on!"

. . . . . .

Nearly all the boys are killed or captured when the first German column attack and capture the school.

However, Sam Villiers and his brother, Steve, manage to escape and gain the Colchester garrison, who have turned out and

entrenched themselves for the defence

while the main forces come up.

The boy scouts tell their story to the British general, and, after a good sleep, go out and reconnoitre.

Sam Villiers is able to capture the German plans, and thus saves the British forces from a terrible defeat.

General Sir Sholto Nugent retires with his men. and manages for a time to keep

the Germans in check.

Sir Sholto orders Sam and Steve to his tent, and the two brothers ask the general for something to do.

"Yes," said Sir Sholto, decisively, "I can give you some work!"

(Now go on with the Story.)

Captured by the German Outpost.

Sam and Stephen drew themselves up, and their eyes sparkled.

"I may be wrong to let you run the risk," said the general grimly, "but you seem to thrive on it, and it's in the King's service. My own scouts have not returned. Do you know the country between here and the Blackwater estuary?"

"Every inch of it, sir," replied Sam, "and every creek and island in the inlets."

"I thought you would," nodded Sir Sholto. "Now listen. I want to know what is happening on my right flank. The Germans have seized Maldon, at the head of the estuary, and are using it as a base for supplies and ammunition. They are feeding their army from the sea, by way of ships passing up the Blackwater. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am pinned here, and unable to move; all I can do is to hold out against the overwhelming forces before me. German troops have landed in the Crouch and Blackwater, and it is vital for me to know how they are placed, and what they mean to do. If there is a weak spot in them, I must know it.

"They have so many outposts, and are so strongly picketed that my scouts can hardly get through. I fear many have been caught and shot. I depend on you to get through, and to win your way back again with the news. Can you do it?"

"It's just our job, sir," said Sam enthusiastically.

"If you don't come back——"

"It'll be because we've shared the fate of your men, sir, that's all. But I think I can promise you that news. We'll get through."

"Hadn't you better leave your young brother behind?"

Stephen looked absolutely mutinous at this.

"He'll be very useful, sir. If one doesn't get through, the other may"

"Very good. You know your work, and I shall give you a free hand.'

"Do you mean an entirely free hand, sir—to do as we like?" said Sam eagerly.

"You are irregulars," said the general, with a nod, "and

are free to do the best you can for yourselves. Go and turn in now, and start at dusk."

"Mayn't we go now, sir?"

"No use till dark. You've got to get some rest—there's no saying when you'll get any more. Come and see me before you leave."

The boys saluted, and went out.

"This is great!" said Sam. "A really free hand. We'll get some work in for the old flag to-night, Steve. Something more than scoutin', maybe. The old man's right, we'd better get a snooze while we can; but I must find out how things stand first."

There was no sign of fighting between the two armies for some time, and in the next hour Sam picked up all the news he could about the war. He learned that the North Sea Fleet had been cut off at its base in the Forth, and suffered severe losses, also that the Germans, for the time, had command of the sea. He likewise heard what the reader has already learned from London, concerning the causes of the war, and the way the invasion had been planned and carried out, while the British Lion snoozed.

Thinking what little credit it reflected on anyone in this country, and especially on those paid to look after such matters, Sam retired to a snug nook near the ammunition waggons with his brother, where they both curled up and went promptly to sleep—a useful accomplishment of theirs, enabling them to get good sound rest at any hour of the clock.

The twilight was falling when Sam awoke, and leaving quietly, he went to the general's tent as ordered. In less than a minute he returned and roused his brother.

"Time to start, Steve," he said, handing him a couple of packets. "Shove these in your pocket—emergency rations, in case we can't get food."

"Where did you steal 'em?" said Stephen.

"From a scientific officer-johnnie who's experimenting with them. Queer how careful these fellows are, isn't it? Step out, now!"

"We don't want the horse?"

"Course not! We've got to trust to our eyes, ears, an' feet. If they fail us, we'll get a bullet for our pains. When we've learnt what we want to know, we must separate, an' if one's caught, the other must get back to camp without waiting, an' make his report. Now for it!"

Straight away southward did Sam travel, till he was well away from the farthest British outposts, and then, leaving the roads, the brothers struck across country. There was scarcely a field or a farmstead they did not know, and in finding his way about silently, Stephen was not much inferior to his brother. Yet they little thought how thoroughly a simple device was to bring them to grief that night.

Passing round Layer Marney, they climbed the hills beyond with great caution, keeping on the darkest side of the hedges, and making no more sound than cats, till they reached the high table-land of Tiptree Heath, from which the great salt inlet of the Blackwater Estuary could be seen glimmering in the moonlit distance, like a small inland sea. The two big islands of Osea and Northay could be seen like dark patches on the water.

"Hold on!" whispered Sam. "It's likely the Germans 'll have an outpost or two on the heath here. We've got to be precious careful we don't run into one, an' at the same time we want to find where they lie. You strike out to the right a couple of hundred yards, while I take the left; we'll scout the place separately, an' meet at the old barn above Little Totham. Don't waste any time over it, because Maldon's our goal, an' we've got to push on there."

The brothers separated, vanishing quietly from each other's view, and Sam, threading through the gorse-bushes, stopped and crouched as he saw a white object a hundred yards or more away, among the may-trees.

"A tent!" he thought. "Can't be German; an outpost keeping guard wouldn't stick a tent up. It don't look like a military one, either. Oh, I know; it's that flimsy bathing-tent somebody had here two summers ago for sketchin' from. They only used it in the daytime."

Paying no more attention to the tent, Sam went on his way. He thought he caught the sound of low voices, and saw dark forms away on his right. Skirting to the left to avoid them, bending double as he went, and quickening his pace, he descended the slope.

Then the calamity happened. Some invisible object—for he watched his track carefully—suddenly caught his toe, and he fell sprawling, and at the same moment a loud report was heard a dozen yards away, and a flash of flame lit the darkness for an instant.

Even as Sam fell he knew too well what had happened. He had caught his foot in the tight-stretched wire of an alarm-gun, planted some distance away, which went off with a bang.

Unable to save himself, he fell heavily right across a tree-stump, that knocked the wind out of him, and knew that he had walked into the enemy's trap.

Hardly had the crack of the alarm-gun sounded, than two bulky figures came springing down towards him. Sam, winded and badly bruised, tried to rise in time to defend himself; but, with a shout, a big, helmeted German soldier flung himself bodily on the boy, and bore him down.

Sam struggled violently to get a hand to the revolver he had in his side-pocket, but the big man had him by the wrists, and in a moment a second German added himself to the embroilment, and helped him to pin Sam down. Though the breath was knocked out of him, they found him as slippery as an eel, and all but lost him. After a short struggle, however, they strapped his hands behind his back, disarmed him, and jerked him to his feet.

"An Englander all right enough!" growled one of his captors, peering into Sam's face. "A brat, too—a suckling soldier, by his uniform. Thought he could steal past our outposts."

"Who are you, Britisher?" said the other gruffly. "You look like being shot unless that grey coat's a proper uniform."

"You'd better talk English if you want to know anything from me," said Sam coolly. "What's that you're talking about?"

"I say you nod right soldat," said the first man, in very broken English. "You wissen vas happen to der civilian caught mit arms—eh?"

"I deserve to be hanged for falling into your clumsy trap," said Sam, who was bitterly angry with himself for not seeing the wire; "but I'm a cadet lieutenant in the King's Service, so unless you're playing blind hokey with all the rules of war, you can't do more than keep me prisoner."

"Bring him along, Hans," said the first of his captors, in his own tongue. "We'll let the lieutenant settle what's to be done with him."

They brought him roughly up the hill, one of the men holding him, while the other held a rifle's muzzle to the small of his back, and, rather to Sam's surprise, they took him to the square artist's tent he had passed before.

"They've collared this for their own use, seeing it's all there, an' ready," he thought. "Thank Heaven Steve's got clear!"

He was marched into the tent, where another man was keeping guard, and a sharp-looking, alert German lieutenant rose to look at the prisoner. The captors told him how they had caught him, and the officer glanced quickly and sternly over Sam's figure and clothes.

"What corps do you belong to?" he said sharply in German.

Sam shook his head. He did not mean to let it be known that he knew that tongue. The officer repeated the question in fairly good English.

"The Greyfriars Cadet Corps," answered Sam.

"What? I know of no such corps," said the lieutenant sternly.

"Some of your blessed countrymen do, though, since Tuesday," thought Sam.

"Do you claim to be a recognised British soldier?"

"Certainly!" said Sam briefly. "A lieutenant in the King's Service, as I told your men."

"Very well; that will be seen into later. You will be sent to headquarters as a prisoner, and if your story is true, you may get parole. Has Bach come back, Muller?" he said to one of his men.

"Here he comes now, sir."

Sam pricked up his ears at the name Bach. The next moment the tent-flies were opened, and in strode a man, at the sight of whom the young scout's eyes flashed.

It was Bach-Frittheim, the ex-German master, lately the spy of Greyfriars, in a Prussian sergeant's uniform. He stared at Sam in amazement, and his narrow eyes gleamed as he saw the boy was a prisoner.

"What's the matter, Frittheim?" said the lieutenant. "Do you know this prisoner?"

"Know him!" cried the ex-spy viciously. "He was my pupil at Greyfriars! Why, Herr Lieutenant, you have caught the very man the whole army wants—the brat who broke into General von Adler's tent and captured the despatches from his table!"

"Frittheim," exclaimed the officer fiercely, leaping up, "do you mean it?"

"Mean it, sir!" cried Frittheim, pointing to Sam. "I tell you, you have there the cub to whom we owe the loss of Nugent's brigade this morning, which else our troops would have wiped out. It was he who captured those despatches and wrecked the general's plans."

Sam smiled grimly at this, and Frittheim burst into uncontrollable rage.

"He's laughing at us, look at him, the British pig-dog!"

cried the spy, raising his hand with a sudden gesture to strike the bound prisoner across the face. But the lieutenant caught Frittheim's arm.

"Hold, sergeant; you forget yourself!" said the officer sternly. "Remember, you are before your superior officer. Attention!"

Much against his will, Frittheim had to stand back and come sharply to attention, his heels together, and his hands by his sides; but he glared none the less savagely at Sam. It was evident that the spy was a more or less privileged man, though he only held the rank of sergeant in the forces. He muttered an apology to the lieutenant.

"Be careful what you are doing, Frittheim," said the officer grimly. "Now, let me hear what this is about. I have only had a rumour of it. You say this prisoner captured General von Adler's plans."

"Yes, lieutenant. This very morning he made his way into the general's tent by an underground passage that was known to him, and, having the luck of a Britisher, he got hold of the general's despatches and escaped with them. He took them straight to his own general, and, owing to this, the small British force from Colchester was able to slip through the fingers of our Third and Fifth Army Corps, and is now in a strong position, with reinforcements pouring in. To this cub we owe the loss of a great German victory."

"Herr Gott!" exclaimed the lieutenant, his face darkening. "I heard some news of this, but I did not know it was so bad. You are sure this is the lad?"

"Sure? He was one of my pupils at Greyfriars, lieutenant. More than that, he was concerned in the blowing up of the tower there, when our men took it; he's the leader of that schoolboy corps who gave us such trouble. I dare swear his young brother is somewhere round here—they are always together. Have your men caught him also?"

"We've seen nothing of him," exclaimed the lieutenant, starting up. "Here, sentry, pass the word to the next picket to search for another Britisher, who should be somewhere near."

"In the same grey uniform," put in Frittheim.

"Hunt for him, and shoot him if he attempts to escape!" commanded the officer. And then he turned to Sam. "Is this brother of yours in the neighbourhood?" he said sharply.

"He's out of your reach long ago," said Sam quietly; "you may save your men the trouble."

"What is he? How old is he?"

"His age is fifteen, or thereabouts," answered Sam, who had a reason for telling him.

"Oh, pish! A mere infant!" muttered the lieutenant, turning away.

"But a dangerous one," returned Frittheim sullenly, in a low voice. "It was he who upset my signalling arrangements at Greyfriars before the invasion. They poke their noses in everywhere, these two brats."

"I've made an important capture," said the lieutenant.

There was something of a sneer on the sergeant's face as he replied:

"You have indeed, Herr Lieutenant. If I might make a suggestion, not as a sergeant, but as Bach-Frittheim of the Secret Service," he added, in a much lower voice, "it is that the prisoner should be taken outside and shot at once. It is worth while making quite sure of him."

"No," said the officer; "he must be taken before Colonel Blitz, commanding at Maldon. We are sure enough of him," he added, with a grim laugh. "Colonel Blitz makes short work of such as he. The prisoner will be shot within the hour."

Frittheim nodded.

"Ganz gut! Colonel Blitz will give them short shrift, sir, as you say. He knows of the despatches affair; I brought him the news two hours ago. He will be well pleased."

"Have you anything to say," said the officer curtly, turning to Sam, "before I take you to be shot for a spy?"

"I am not a spy," returned Sam quietly. "What I did was an act of war—in uniform, and under arms."

"You will be shot none the less neatly for that," said the officer, with a grim chuckle, "when Herr Colonel Blitz receives you at his quarters. Sentry!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Pass the word for an escort to be sent up to take the prisoner to Maldon."

. . . . . .

When Stephen parted from his brother to scout over the further side of the heath, he made his way well out to the right before striking downwards. Though not quite such a practised hand at scouting as his brother, he had better luck on this occasion, for no concealed spring-gun wire lay in his way.

He did not progress very rapidly, however, for he caught sight of a couple of men with rifles showing against the skyline, and made a long circuit to clear them.

"Germans, right enough," he thought. "We're in a pretty hornet's-nest here! They're sure to have outposts on the heath, of course."

Onward he went, bending double among the gorse-bushes, when suddenly, well away to his left, a sharp report broke the silence of the night. Stephen's heart gave a jump, and he crouched flat.

"Great Scott!" he thought. "Have they dropped on Sam?"

A sickening feeling of anxiety came over him. He felt he must know what had happened, at any cost.

"It didn't sound like a rifle-shot," he muttered, "nor a revolver. What could it be? It's no use my going on till I know."

Rapidly turning to the left, he made his way in the direction of the shot, dropping flat on the grass, and crawling along cautiously.

Very soon he saw a white object loom up no great way ahead, and crouching in the fern, he saw it was the tent, which had been hidden from his view before.

It was not so familiar to him as to Sam, and he took it for a German army-tent, for he could make out the form of the sentry at the fly.

Stephen waited breathlessly, hoping for some clue to the mystery of the shot, when three dark forms came into view a hundred yards away, making for the tent. He heard the challenge of the sentry, and even at that distance he could see that two of the men were in uniform, and carried rifles, while the form between them was unarmed, a prisoner.

"Heavens!" groaned Stephen silently, a sudden chill at his heart. "It's Sam! They've taken him!"

The boy lay motionless, feeling strangely lonely and wretched. He saw the party of three enter the tent and disappear.

"He'll be shot!" thought Stephen. "They'll swear he's a spy! What shall I do?"

He dug his fingers into the turf in his anxiety, and stared through the gloom at the tent.

"I know what Sam'd tell me to do. He'd bid me go an' do what we set out for, an' not stop for him. But I won't!" He thought rapidly and desperately as the moments flew by. "I'm my own officer now he's caught. I must find out what they're goin' to do with him. I can't go on if old Sam's done for."

Taking a rapid look round, Stephen wormed his way round in a wide circle under cover of the bushes, feeling strangely reckless whether he were caught or not. He meant to reach that tent at any risk, and learn his brother's fate. If Sam were doomed, Stephen did not much care what happened to himself.

"They can't shoot him—they can't shoot him!" he kept thinking to himself, as he crept along. "Even the Germans wouldn't do it!"

There was but the one sentry at the entrance, and Stephen saw nobody else. In a very short time he arrived in the rear of the tent, and, leaving the sheltering bushes and fern, crawled quickly up till he was against the canvas itself, on the opposite side from the entrance and the sentry.

Stephen crouched flat between the tent-ropes. The first sound that fell on his ear was the gruff voice of the German lieutenant within, of whom Stephen knew nothing. Then Sam's clear tones were heard in reply, and a few moments later Stephen held his breath as the sound of footsteps reached him, approaching the tent, which was entered by the new-comer, whoever he was.

The sharp exclamation that immediately followed made Stephen start. The boy wondered if his hearing was playing tricks with him.

"I ought to know that voice in a hundred," he thought. "And yet—is it possible? I've got to see, if I'm nabbed for it!"

Very slowly he raised up a portion of the lower edge of the canvas, till he could peer beneath it into the interior of the tent. His heart gave a bound.

"Frittheim!" he muttered silently. "I was right, then!"

Once he had made sure of his man, Stephen lowered the canvas again, and remained motionless.

With beating heart, the boy listened to the harsh German voices, and heard the conversation of which the reader already knows. He set his teeth as Frittheim's vengeful proposals reached his ears.

"They'll shoot him!" thought the boy. "To be taken to Maldon—old Sam! The German brutes—they're goin' to shoot him!"

A red mist seemed to dance before Stephen's eyes, and then his brain cleared again.

"I must do something to save him! Either I'll save him, or they shall have me, too!"

He looked the tent over with a quick, calculating eye. A reckless mood came over him. Any chance seemed better than none. If Sam's fate was sealed, what else mattered?

"By gum! Could it be done?" thought Stephen, staring at the tent. "It'll be the end of one or both of us; but I'll try it—hit or miss!"

He drew from his pocket the long, keen jack-knife he always carried—the only arm about him. Opening it silently, he felt one of the tent-ropes with the fingers of his left hand.

There was a sudden coarse exclamation in German from the other side. Stephen flattened himself to the ground, gripping his knife, as the big German sentry suddenly strode round the corner of the tent, rifle in hand, and an oath on his lips.

How Ned of Northey Lent a Hand.

Stephen gave himself up for lost when the sentry appeared. He nerved himself to make one spring and try to close with the man, though it would have been as useless as for a terrier pup to spring at a boarhound.

But, to his amazement, the German stopped short within a yard of the boy's prostrate body. The man had his rifle at the ready, and was staring out into the night and listening intently. He looked beyond Stephen, towards the gorse-bushes, and did not seem to see what lay under his nose. Whatever had put him on the alert, he did not dream of the danger crouched right beneath the ropes of the tent.

Stephen lay without daring to breathe or moving an eyelid. For quite ten seconds the sentry stood almost directly over him, staring out into the darkness, and listening. Then, with a grunt, the man sloped his rifle and paced back to his post at the tent door, as if satisfied.

"Great whiskers!" thought Stephen. "That was a close shave if ever there was one!"

He waited a few moments till complete quietness, and then raised himself again, taking a final survey of the tent before getting to work.

It was a flimsy affair, not a military tent as he had thought at first, but a sort of bathing-tent, with a nearly square top and a light pole in the middle. The canvas was a thin, light material. There were only four thin tent-ropes, and the whole arrangement was unstable and rickety. Stephen saw at a glance what Sam had known beforehand—that it was some holiday-maker's shelter that the Germans had turned to their own use.

"If it was a proper Army tent there'd be no chance," thought Stephen; "but as it is, I might be able to manage it."

His scheme allowed of no delay, and, bracing his nerves, Stephen started at once to crawl round towards the sentry. Flat to the ground as a snake, he wormed his way along close to the canvas till he was able to look round the corner.

The sentry stood at the tent-flap, silent and motionless, a dark figure, his rifle shouldered. He did not pace to and fro, for an outpost moves as little as possible when not obliged. Now came the anxious time. Stephen had another six feet to go before he could reach the right-hand tent-rope. He covered the distance inch by inch, still unseen, and reached the peg.

The rope was not too taut. Stephen laid the keen edge of his knife against it, and slowly parted the rope, leaving one thin strand to hold it together and prevent the cut line from swinging inwards. Then, hardly daring to breathe, he wormed his way back again.

The luck held, so far. The other side had to be done, but that lay still more in the shadow, and was easier. Stephen cut the front rope there also, and came safely back to the rear. Once there, he cut both the back ropes right through, and held the ends in his hands.

"Now," he thought, "what about the sentry?"

There seemed no way out of that difficulty. The sentry was outside.

"It's all a toss-up, anyway," mused the boy. "I must risk that. I've succeeded better than I'd any right to expect. Sam must take his chance of gettin' away in the bust-up."

"Sentry!" called the harsh voice within the tent. "Here!"

"Yes, sir!" was the reply. And Stephen blessed his luck as he heard the sentry go in through the entrance. Grabbing both the tent-ropes at the back, Stephen pulled with all his strength and threw his whole weight on them. There was a rustle, a loud snap, and pole and canvas came down in a heap, upsetting the party inside and smothering them like a tarpaulin thrown over a brood of chickens. Stephen threw himself on top of the ruins, knife in hand, crying at the top of his voice:

"Sam! Sam!"

A tremendous outburst of German oaths came from under the canvas, where bulky forms were struggling and kicking. The sentry's rifle squibbed off, and the bullet whizzed through the cloth and away into the night. With one stroke of his knife Stephen ripped a long, narrow slit in the canvas, calling sharply his brother's name.

"Sam! Here you are! Make a dash for it, quick!"

The first head that popped through the slit was not Sam's, but showed the purple features of Frittheim, the spy, convulsed with rage. No sooner had he put it up than Stephen's knife glittered in his face, and, with a cry of fear, the German ducked under again.

"The prisoner! Get hold of the prisoner! Don't let him escape!" roared the voice of the lieutenant; and just at that moment, from the struggling heap under the tent, Sam's head and shoulders plunged up through the rent. In a moment Stephen grabbed him and hauled him through.

"Pull! They've got hold of me!" gasped Sam, as he was suddenly checked. Stephen let go with one hand and struck downwards through the canvas. There was a yelp of surprise and pain, and next moment Sam came through with a jerk, just as four or five dark figures came rushing over the heath towards the fallen tent.

"Cut me loose!" cried Sam, scrambling up and thrusting his bound hands before Stephen. "Quick!"

In a moment Stephen saw what was wrong—he had not thought his brother was bound. One quick cut of the knife severed the strap, and away bounded the boys, pell-mell down the hillside.

A burst of shouting and a sharp fusillade of shots were sent after them, and the hoarse cries of those who had been buried under the tent, now struggling out, told the newcomers what was the matter. It was the escort ordered to take Sam to Maldon that had just arrived, and learning from the infuriated lieutenant and Frittheim the catastrophe which had happened, they dashed in pursuit.

Crack, crack, crack! spat the rifles, and four or five bullets sang past the ears of the boys as they raced down the furzy slope. But the night was too black and the pace too hot for accurate shooting. A shouted order in German from the sergeant in charge of the men stopped the shooting. They were to get to closer quarters before firing, and set themselves to run the fugitives down.

"Make for the waterside!" cried Sam, as he ran. "They've too many men to dodge up here!"

The brothers ran as they had never run before. They were both good sprinters, and rapidly increased their distance from the heavier Germans, encumbered with side-arms and marching-boots; but the pursuers stuck to it doggedly, and came thundering down the hill like a herd of buffaloes.

"We've done 'em!" said Stephen triumphantly, as he flew along with his head well up. "They've no earthly chance now!"

"Rot!" returned Sam tersely. "They've a better chance than we. The whole district's alive with 'em. Don't talk, but run!"

The distant crack of rifle-shots answered each other from point to point of the heath—not directed at the boys, but signals from picket to picket, giving the alarm. The first pursuers were nearly left behind now, when suddenly the two boys nearly ran right into an outpost lying among the furze-bushes at the foot of the hill. A sharp German challenge was instantly followed by a shot, which stirred Sam's hair as the brothers doubled and dashed away at right angles, with four more men in close pursuit. They were barely able to dodge round a clump of hawthorn-trees in time to save themselves from being shot down at close range, and on came the fresh pursuers, firing snapshots as they ran.

"That's the worst of runnin' through the lines when you don't know where the enemy are!" muttered Sam, as he sped along for the distant embankment of the estuary. "The marshes here are as bald as an egg, an' there's no cover. Make for the reed-beds down by the river-wall."

They dashed to the foot of the grassy embankment that separated the salt-marshes from the more solid land, and crept cautiously over to gain the other side. Now the great estuary gleamed before them in the starlight, showing a channel two miles across, with two large islands lying apart. A maze of saltings and reedy flats, with creeks running far into them from the tideway, lay between the boys and the channel. It was a tract Sam knew every inch of, and he was elated at having reached it in time, when Stephen touched his arm.

"Look out!" said the boy, pointing eastwards along the embankment, where seven or eight dark figures were running towards the boys.

"Confound it! The brutes are everywhere!" muttered Sam, dashing down on to the saltings and skirting round a corner of the river-wall. "That's another picket, an' they've cut us off the only way we could retreat. Down into the creek, quick!"

Out of sight of their pursuers for the moment, Sam and Stephen jumped into a deep, muddy creek that led down to the main river. The tide was nearly out, and there was only a trickle of water. By bending double and slithering along over the ooze, they were able to keep below the level of the saltings and out of view of the Germans. In this way they soon came to the point where the creek joined the open estuary, and Sam peeped up cautiously over the bank.

"They're coming this way! They're bound to find us here!" he said. "We've——"

"There's the old bit of an island where we used to lie an' shoot plover," broke in Stephen, pointing to a small patch of reedy salt-marsh the size of a large table-top, which lay a good way out in the fast-shoaling water. "It'll hide one of us easy, an' there's only one way to it over the soft mud, which they'd never find."

"By George, you're right!" whispered Sam. "Off with you, quick, and get there! It'll only hold one of us!"

"No, you go, Sam. I'm not going if you're to be left behind!"

"Go out to the island at once!" whispered Sam fiercely. "Do you hear, Sergeant Villiers? Obey orders, or——"

Stephen said no more, but went. Though the Greyfriars Corps was wiped out of existence, all save the two brothers, the boy sergeant obeyed his lieutenant. Stephen made his way straight out along the narrow, winding hard-way over the soft ooze, and reached the little patch of salt-marsh just before the pursuers caught sight of it. He crouched flat among the salt rushes and sea-lavender, and Sam lost sight of him at once.

The elder boy, whose chief care was to get his brother out of harm's way, and lead the enemy from his track, returned up the creek and showed himself. The squad of Germans raised a shout as they saw him, and came after him in full cry. Sam ran for the river-wall, jumping the narrow creeks that lay in his path, crept over the wall under cover of a clump of thorn-bushes, and doubled back eastwards again. He was very soon seen, however, and away came the Germans in chase once more. Sam took to the saltings, where he was able to keep ahead of his floundering pursuers, many of whom were bogged in the oozy creeks; but such a swarm of them had now arrived from the heath that all escape was cut off.

"They've got me!" thought Sam; and, as a last resource, he dodged into a bed of reeds that grew by the side of a large, deep creek. For the moment he had vanished from his pursuers, but there was no way out.

"They'll soon search this," he muttered. "If I only had my pistol, or any weapon to make a last stand with! It means Maldon and a firing-party for me this time! Here they come!"

Seven or eight of the helmeted Germans, bayonets in hand, were making for the reed-bed. Sam nerved himself to seize with his bare hands the first discoverer of his hiding-place, and claim one life for his own if he could.

"Nip in here, an' don't make a row," said a cool voice at his elbow.

Sam nearly exclaimed aloud in his surprise. Looking down, he saw a long, low, grey gunning-punt lying close against the reeds, and in her sat a dark, jersey-clad form in a fur cap.

The fugitive waited not a moment, but boarded her without making a sound, for the Germans were already hustling into the reeds. Instantly the punt glided away under cover of the tall rushes, and new hope sprang into the boy's heart.

"Lie down flat, an' howd yer breath," murmured the boatman in his ear. "We'll cheat them murderin' owd varmints!"

Sam lay down at full length on the punt's floor, and the stranger did the same. With a hand over either side, holding in each a little short paddle, the puntsman made his craft shoot away down the creek. Sam expected every moment they would be seen and fired upon; but the puntsman deftly twisted his vessel aside into a branch of the creek, paddled round an island of salt-marsh, threaded silently among the mazy patches of ooze and saltings that dotted the water, and was soon a quarter of a mile away from the starting-point.

She was not seen. There is nothing harder to see at night than a wild-fowler's shooting-punt, painted the grey colour of a seagull's back. She is not a broad, clumsy craft, like a river-punt, but a long, low canoe, with pointed ends, and a flat floor, very low in the water, and decked in fore and aft. For working up to wild duck the puntsman lies flat in her and drives her with an arm over each side, and thus it was that the one Sam was in managed to slip away without being seen.

The fur-clad puntsman halted at last, close under the side of a patch of ooze, and looked cautiously over it towards the shore. For the first time Sam saw his face, as the dim starlight shone on it.

"Great Scott" he said, under his breath, "it's Ned!"

"That's me, Master Aubrey," said the puntsman. "Ned o' Northey. We've taken the old beggars in this time!"

He looked at Sam with an alluring grin—a powerful-looking, sun-tanned young fellow of about eighteen, wearing long sea-boots. As he glanced back at the distant forms of the Germans on the salt-marsh, his hand grasped an eel-spear that lay beside him.

"The dirty Dutch varmints!" he said. "I come on one last night as I was prickin' for eels in the creeks. He was patrollin' with a rifle, an' he ups an' points it at me like winkin', but I drove my owd pritch* through his throat afore he could pull the trigger, an' I reckon there's one less of 'em to worry the old country."

"I ought to have known it was your punt, Ned," whispered Sam. "You've saved my life—they'd all but got me."

"Just bide here a bit till they clear off," said the puntsman, "then we'll paddle away to my houseboat. This is a bit hotter'n shootin' ducks, eh, Master Aubrey?"

Sam nodded. He knew Ned Musset of old. Many and many a long day's sport had he had with him in the winter, for Ned was one of the old breed of marshmen, who earned his bread by fishing and wild-fowl shooting on the great estuary, and lived in a little cabin built in an old ship's lifeboat moored in a creek running into Northey Island. The young fowler was known all round the coast as Ned of Northey, and between him and Sam, the wealthy squire's son, there was a strong friendship.

"I was lyin' in the creek there, bablin' for eels, when I heard them varmints, an' knew they was after somebody," said Ned. "These be wholly rum times for Britishers, ain't they, when shovel-footed Germans can chase us about as if they owned the land. I reckon we can go now. Do you lie still."

"My brother Steve's on the little island off Cob Creek," said Sam. "We must take him with us at once!"

"Punt 'on't hold three. I'll have to put you on to Northey first, and come back for he," said Ned.

And without further talk, the punt was driven swiftly out from the land, and, making a wide detour to avoid being seen, pulled rapidly out towards the wide, dark mass of Northey Island, whose marshy shores are protected from the tides by ancient embankments. In a lonely creek, hidden among the saltings that fringed the island, they came upon Ned's houseboat—a rough, tarred structure, moored fore and aft with ropes. Sam at once boarded her, on Ned's urging him, and the latter disappeared again into the night in search of Stephen, whose hiding-place he knew well. In less than half an hour the punt came creeping back with Stephen on board.

"Hallo, Sam, so you've done 'em, too!" said the boy triumphantly, as he jumped aboard. "Thanks to old Ned, here, they haven't got much change out of us this journey!"

All three went at once into the houseboat's cabin, which was rough but cosy, hung all round with guns, eel-spears, and nets. Sam, who still scarcely knew how his rescue from the tent had been managed, was burning to know, and Stephen told him briefly.

"Well done, Steve!" said his brother warmly. "By George, but you're a kid to be proud of!"

"I couldn't skip off an' leave you there, could I?" said Stephen. "But I had a lot of luck. I hardly hoped it would come off."

"Great flounders!" exclaimed the young wildfowler, who had been listening open-mouthed. "Ha' you two young gents done all this between you? D'ye belong to General Nugent's sodgers, then?"

"We're scouting for him, Ned," said Sam, "an' we've got to find out how the land lies at Maldon. Have you been troubled by the Germans?"

"I doubt they'd like to get hold o' me, if they knew who speared their sentry on the saltin's," replied Ned. "I've seen a lot of 'em, but they ain't dropped on me. Why, in my bit of a punt, among the marshes here, I could keep out o' the way of a thousand o' the clumsy swabs, an' never be seen. Maldon's full of 'em."

"When did they get there?" asked Sam eagerly. "How many are there?"

"Two days ago they come up in two light-draught

*"Eel-spear."

steamers, an' landed their men in boats. There's no defences an' no soldiers at Maldon. They dropped on the place an' planted their guns. It belongs to 'em now, they say. I reckon that won't last long. There was a torpedo-boat destroyer came up with the steamers, but she's gone."

"Ah!" said Sam,, looking round the cabin. "Well, Ned, can you lend me a rig-out? I want a jersey, dreadnought breeches, and sea-boots."

"You can have 'em like a shot, sir. I've got a spare set."

"I'll have them now, then. The dawn's beginning to break," said Sam.

And twenty minutes later he stood up in just such clothes as Ned of Northey wore.

"What's the game?" said Stephen. "Can I have a set, too?"

"No, young 'un. You must stay here with Ned. You can't come with me in that uniform, an' Ned's duds won't fit you. I'm goin' into Maldon. Ned, I want your dinghy."

Ned went out and pulled a boat alongside. Stephen looked bitterly disappointed at being left behind.

"They'll shoot you if you're caught, Sam. They're death on spies."

"This isn't spying," said Sam hotly, "this is scouting! I'm sent to report what strength they're in, an' I'm goin' to do it. It's useless my goin' into Maldon in uniform. Ned, if I shouldn't come back, my father'll square you for the clothes an' your boat."

"Let me go instead, master?" pleaded Ned, looking very anxious. "It ain't right you should risk yourself while I'm here!"

"I'm on King's service, Ned," said Sam, with a laugh; and after a question or two about the way the quays were guarded, he pushed off, leaving two heavy hearts behind him.

Sam rowed straight up the channel of the estuary without any concealment. His plan was to go to Maldon openly as a fisherman from the river, and not to sneak in on the quiet—a proceeding which would be fatal. He had an old yellow sou'-wester on his head, and he pulled like a Blackwater smacksman.

As the light grew and he rounded the point, the grey old town of Maldon, perched on its hill at the head of the waters, came into view. Two or three strange-looking, flat-bottomed steamers lay on the mud off the town, and Sam rowed right up to the Hythe.

It was a strange sight that met his eyes. A regiment of German infantry were encamped on the Hythe recreation-grounds by the waterside, and the peaceful old Essex town was in the hands of the enemy. A sharp challenge from a German sentry met Sam as he was about to land. The man ordered him away, and pointed to the quays farther up. Nobody was allowed to land at the Hythe.

Sam obeyed without a word, and rowed up to Fullbridge, where no one stopped him from landing. He made fast the dinghy and went ashore, and the very first person he met was the lieutenant, whose prisoner he had been in the tent a few hours before, marching in with his picket. Sam walked straight past him, the yellow sou'-wester shading his face, and was not recognised.

The townspeople stood about in groups, sullen and ominous-looking, talking in low tones. From the old tower of St. Peter's—the highest point of Maldon — the German standard floated in the breeze. On the walls in every street were the Kaiser's proclamations, such as the reader has already seen in the previous chapters of this chronicle, and German troops and guns were constantly passing through.

Early though it was, everybody was afoot, and Sam, walking down the streets with a rolling, fisherman's gait, seemingly taking no notice of anything, but in reality making quick mental notes of all he saw, presently noticed a face he knew. It was that of Jacob Astley, a well-to-do shipyard owner, who had built the racing-yacht which Sam's father owned.

Sam had a clay pipe in his mouth—though he did not smoke—and stopping the shipbuilder, he said, in rough Essex dialect:

"Oblige us with a light, sir?"

Mr. Astley, looking moody and preoccupied, held out a box of matches, and as he did so he peered into the sou'-wester as he caught Sam's eye.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Aubrey Villiers!"

"Hush!" murmured Sam, under his breath. "Unless you want to get me shot!"

The shipbuilder swallowed his astonishment, and waited.

"You know all that's happened here," said Sam. "Tell me, while I light this beastly pipe, what the Germans have done in Maldon; how many they are; and what guns they have. I'm here on Service duty."

"There's a corps of about one thousand under Colonel Blitz," was the reply, as Mr. Astley leaned casually against the wall, as though gossiping with the fisherman. "They've made the mayor prisoner, and they've quartered themselves in the town. Not having an armed man in the place, we could make no resistance—the few who tried it have been shot down. They got us before we knew where we were.

"They don't molest us as long as we don't interfere with them, but the townspeople are so enraged they are planning to rise against the enemy. I fear they'll do it, and it'll end in their all being butchered, for we can do nothing against four thousand armed men. But I'll do my share if it comes to that!" said the shipbuilder, between his teeth.

"I hope they won't," said Sam; "it will only be useless slaughter. Do they let anyone leave the town?"

"They don't trouble about us here, but nobody can get away. The country round is ringed with pickets. Did you come by water? You can't get out of the river—there are German warships and torpedo-boats at the mouth."

"Will they try to stop my rowing down again?"

"Not they! They know you can't get away. They've got us safe, and they don't trouble about us townspeople at all. An Essex Yeomanry troop from Witham had a gallant brush with the Germans, and killed several, cutting out a gun as well, but they were wiped out by superior numbers. There's a battery of field-guns here, mounted above the town."

"What is Colonel Blitz waiting for?"

"He's here to guard the communications, as it's called. This is where a lot of stores for the German Army are to come. I've learned they're expecting several steamers with ammunition and guns. They'll probably come up on the next tide."

"Thanks," said Sam quietly; "that's exactly what I wanted to know. You've done me a big service, Mr. Astley. Now I'll go. You'll say nothing of having seen me?"

"Not a word, of course! My boy, there's nothing I wouldn't do to pull down that accursed rag"—he pointed to the German standard on St. Peter's—"that flies where no flag but ours has flown since the Danes took Maldon a thousand years ago! Good-bye, and god-speed you!"

Sam nodded silently, and a few minutes later was back at the quay. His mission at Maldon was done.

(Another long instalment of this splendid war story next Thursday.)

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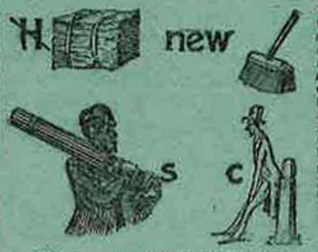

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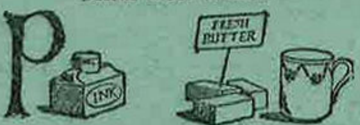

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