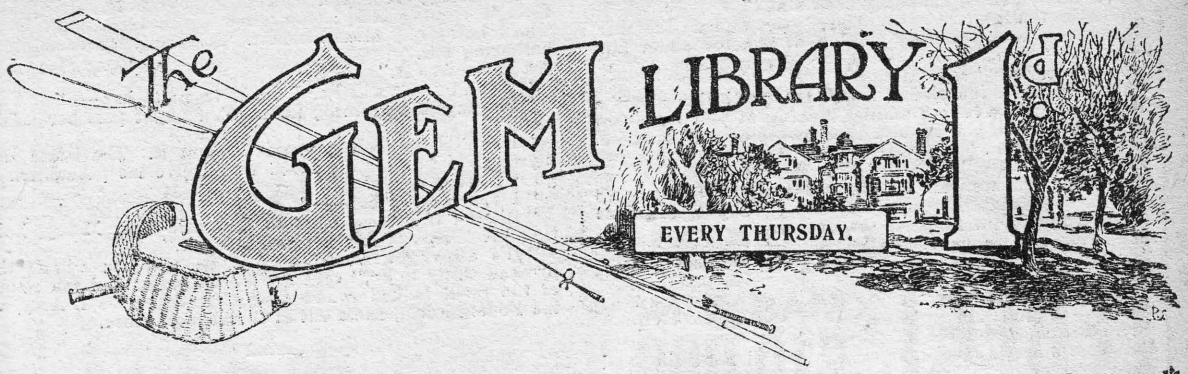

Complete Stories for Everyone, and Every Story a Gem!

MISS PRISCILLA'S PERIL

A Splendid, Long, Complete School Tale of the Boys of St. Jim's.

— BY —

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.
An Amazing Letter.

TOM MERRY, of the Shell Form at St. Jim's, sat on the stone balustrade of the School House steps, with a letter in his hand, and an expression of blank wonder on his face.

He was staring at the letter, which he had just read through, and his look was enough to show that he found something very surprising in the letter.

So preoccupied was he, that he did not see Manners and Lowther, his chums in the Shell, come out of the School House, and stop just before him, looking at him.

Manners and Lowther naturally expected Tom Merry to look up, but he didn't. He stared at the letter in his hand. He was quite unconscious of the proximity of his chums. The two juniors exchanged glances, and Lowther coughed. Still Tom Merry did not remove his gaze from the letter.

The chums caught a glimpse of the writing, and they knew it was that of Tom Merry's old governess, Miss Priscilla Fawcett—the kind old dame who had brought Tom home from India in his early childhood, and had cared for him until he went to school, and after, for that matter. Miss Priscilla's care for her ward was, as a matter of fact, a standing joke in the School House. The amount of medicine she sent him would have stocked a good-sized chemist's shop, and the excellent advice she gave him in lengthy letters would have filled many large volumes. Tom Merry always replied dutifully and gratefully, though it must be admitted that he seldom took the advice, and never took the medicine.

"Ahem!" said Manners.

Even that failed to draw Tom Merry. He seemed to be blind and deaf to his surroundings.

Monty Lowther leaned towards him, putting his mouth close to Tom's ear, and gave a sudden bawl.

"Hallo!"

Tom Merry jumped.

"Oh! Hallo!"

"Oh! You've woke up at last?"

Tom Merry rubbed his ear.

"You ass! You've made my head sing!"

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Lowther "Here we've been standing looking at you for about half an hour——"

"Half a minute," said Manners.

"Well, half a minute, then; I'm not particular about a trifle. Here we've been standing looking at you for about half a minute, and you haven't been aware of our existence. What's the matter?"

"I've had a letter."

"Go hon! As we can see the letter in your hand, we could have guessed that without making any tremendous mental efforts," said Lowther sarcastically.

"It's from my old governess."

"Yes, I know the fist—ahem!—the hand."

"It's a curious letter."

"Nothing new in that."

"I don't understand it."

"Hand it over, and I'll interpret it."

But Tom Merry's face was grave. He did not smile, and he cast another perplexed look at the letter.

"I'm afraid there is something wrong," he said.

Lowther and Manners became serious at once. Miss Priscilla Fawcett, and her touching regard for Tom Merry's health and comfort might be regarded in a humorous light in the School House, but all the fellows had a great respect and liking for her, all the same.

"I'm sorry," said Lowther. "But what's the row?"

"I don't know."

"She's not ill?"

"No, she says not. She's thinking of coming to see me, so she can't be ill."

"Worried about you?"

"No, she doesn't say so."

"Then what——"

"I'd better read you the letter."

"Well, it would simplify matters," Monty Lowther assented.

"Here goes, then. It's very odd. It seems to me that she must have been very disturbed at the time of writing, and got things mixed."

"Go ahead."

"'My dearest Tommy'," began Tom Merry, colouring a little, "'I am writing to tell you that I shall come and see you soon. I have been very much troubled, but he has not been to see me'."

"Who hasn't?"

Tom Merry scratched his curly head.

"That's what I can't make out. Somebody hasn't, but it doesn't appear who and what the chap is."

"Well, get on with the washing."

"'A hundred pounds is a large sum of money, and I could not spare it'."

Lowther whistled.

"You haven't asked her for a hundred pounds, have you, Tom?"

"Of course not."

"Has somebody?"

"I don't know. I suppose so. I can't make it out."

"Finish the letter," said Manners.

"Right-ho!"

Tom Merry read on.

"'But the worry is very great upon my mind. I do not wish to trouble my dearest boy about it, but I do wish he were with me at this moment. I have told him that it will be impossible for me to take part in the bazaar, owing to the disturbed state of my health.'"

"Told whom?"

"Blessed if I know."

"What bazaar?"

"Haven't the faintest idea!"

"Is there any more?" asked Lowther.

"Yes; here you are." Tom Merry read the rest of the letter. "'Do not be surprised to see me at any moment, my dear child. I should feel so much safer with you—Your affectionate old nurse, Priscilla Fawcett.'"

Lowther gave a prolonged whistle.

"What do you make of it?" asked Tom.

"It's a giddy puzzle. If I didn't know Miss Fawcett too well, I should think—ahem!—that somebody had been drinking. There's no beginning or end or middle to the letter."

"It's a bit of a problem," said Manners. "Let's have a look at it. Do you think somebody has been trying to get a hundred pounds from her to start a bazaar?"

"Not likely."

"The chap who hasn't called on her might have called about the bazaar—I mean, he might have been going to call about the bazaar," hazarded Lowther.

Tom Merry shook his head perplexedly.

"There's only one chap who gives bazaars at Huckleberry Heath," he said. "That's the curate, Mr. Dodds. He's a ripping chap; you know him. It couldn't be he who's bothering Miss Fawcett. Somebody or something's bothering her."

"Looks like it."

"I don't know whether I ought to go to her——"

"She says she's coming here. You might pass her on the road."

"I can't help feeling worried about it. The letter is a mystery. I suppose the Head would give me permission to go if I asked him?"

"I suppose so; but——"

"Blessed if I know what to do," said Tom Merry, knitting his brows. "It's a blessed puzzle."

"It's all wight, deah boy. I can tell you what's the pwopah thing to do," said a cheerful voice, and the chums of the Shell looked round as Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form, came out of the School House.

CHAPTER 2.

D'Arcy Gives Advice.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY nodded cheerfully to the Terrible Three. The swell of the School House was looking as elegant as usual, from the tips of his shining boots to the crown of his still more brightly gleaming topper. He jammed his monocle into his eye, and looked at Tom Merry.

"I twust I am not intwudin'," he said. "I happened to heah your wemark, deah boy, as I came out. You can always wely upon me to tell you the pwopah thing to do. What's the posish?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"You're a good little ass, Gussy——"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"But you wouldn't be able to give me advice."

"Wats!"

"You see——"

"I have no desiah to inquire into pwivate mattahs," said the swell of St. Jim's, with a great deal of dignity, "but if my advice could be of any assistance, I should be vewy happay to give it."

Tom Merry handed him the letter.

"Read that, Gussy, and tell us what you think of it."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy took the letter, and turned his eyeglass carefully upon it, and read it through.

"Bai Jove!"

"What do you think of it, Gussy?"

"It's a wathah wemarkable lettah."

"Yes, I know that."

"Miss Pwiscillah is in a feahfully anxious state of mind."

"She seems worried, but I don't know about being fearfully anxious," said Tom Merry.

D'Arcy shook his head.

"You know that I have taken up amateur detective work as a bwain west, Tom Mewwy," he remarked. "I have twained my observation on the system of Sherlock Holmes and Fewwahs Locke. My twained intellect can see things that are invisible to common minds——"

"Common or garden minds?" said Lowther.

"Pway don't be funnay, Lowthah. This is a sewious mattah. Miss Pwiscillah is in a feahfully anxious state of mind. Haven't you noticed that she does not inquiah aftah Tom Mewwy's health?"

"By Jove!" said Tom Merry.

"Has the good lady evah w'itten to you befoah without inquiwin' aftah your health, deah boy?"

"Not that I remember."

"She does not ask if you have got your feet wet——"

"Oh, ring off!"

"Or if you are still weawin' your chest pwotectah——"

"Cheese it!"

"I am not jokin'. These wemarkable omissions fwom the lettah make it perfectly cleah that Miss Pwiscillah is in a feahfully anxious state of mind."

"There's something in it," said Monty Lowther, with a chuckle. "Gussy has really hit the nail on the head, Tom."

"I believe he has. But what do you make of the letter, Gussy?"

The swell of St. Jim's shook his head.

"Weally, I do not know what to make of it," he replied. "It looks to me as if Miss Fawcett was goin' to start a bazaar, and was expectin' somebody to call and lend her a hundwed pounds."

"Try again, Sherlock Holmes."

"Weally, Mannahs——"

"I don't think that's it," said Tom Merry. "But I'm blessed if I know what it is. I don't know what to do."

"It's wathah a doocid awkward posish," agreed Arthur Augustus, handing the letter back to Tom Merry, and

Tom Merry seemed to be blind and deaf to his surroundings, so Monty Lowther leaned towards him, putting his mouth close to Tom's ear. "Hullo!" he yelled.

wrinkling his brows in deep thought. "Howevah, I think I can give you some advice, deah boy."

"You think I ought to ask the Head's permission to go to Miss Fawcett at once?"

"Not exactly."

"What then?"

"You see, deah boys, what is wequired at a moment like this is a fellow of tact and judgment. I should wegard it as a good idea for you to ask the Head's permish for me to go to Hucklebewwy Heath——"

"You!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Why, you ass——" began Lowther

"I wefuse to be called an ass——"

Tom Merry burst into a laugh.

"Thanks, awfully, Gussy. But if anybody goes, it ought to be myself."

"Then pewwaps you could get the Head's permish to take me with you," suggested Arthur Augustus. "I should feel much easiah in my mind if I were there to look aftah you."

"I don't think the Head would part with you, Gussy. You see, there's the whole school requires looking after, too."

And Tom Merry went into the house before D'Arcy could reply to that remark. The hero of the Shell made his way straight to Dr. Holmes's study.

The Head was there, and his deep bass voice bade the junior enter.

"Merry, what is it?"

The Head ceased writing, and glanced across his desk at the junior.

"If you please, sir, I—I want to ask leave."

"Indeed! Why?"

"I've had a letter from my old governess, sir—Miss Fawcett—and she seems to be ill, or something," said Tom Merry. "I'm anxious about her. I thought you might allow me to go home and see her."

"Ahem! H'm!"

"This is the letter, sir."

Dr. Holmes glanced at the letter. An expression of bewilderment came over his face.

"This is a very singular letter, Merry."

"Yes, sir. It makes me feel anxious."

"I am not surprised. I should imagine that Miss Fawcett was ill. You may certainly go, by the first train in the morning, Merry."

"Thank you very much, sir!"

And Tom Merry left the study, feeling more at ease in his mind.

CHAPTER 3.

In the Dead of Night.

TING-A-LING!

Ting-a-ling-a-ling-ting!

The stroke of one had boomed out from the clock-tower!

Taggles, the porter, came shuffling out of his lodge in an overcoat and a pair of old slippers. Taggles did not indulge in the luxury of a dressing-gown, and Taggles was not inclined to dress himself at one o'clock in the morning to open the gates to the persistent person who was ringing the bell. The edge of Taggles's nightshirt showed like the fringe of a petticoat under the greatcoat he had hastily thrown on and buttoned to his chin. His bare feet shuffled in the slippers. Taggles carried a lamp in his hand, and a portentous frown upon his face. Taggles was not in a good temper.

The quadrangle was as black as the inside of a hat.

Hardly a star glimmered in the sky, and the great elms looked like blacker shadows against a black sky.

St. Jim's was sleeping. The last light had long ago been extinguished in the last window.

Taggles had been sleeping the sleep of the just, his slumbers aided and soothed by his last glass of gin-and-water, when the violent ringing of the bell had brought him forth from his lodge in coat and slippers and a bad temper.

Ting-a-ling-a-ling!

"Yes, you can ring!" grunted the school-porter, as he shuffled out. "I'm a-comin' to hopen that there gate just when it suits me, and not a second afore. That's when I'm comin' to hopen that there gate."

Ting-a-ling! Ting-a-ling!

"Drat 'em!" said Taggles. "At this time in the morning, too! Who can it be? Blest if I go to the gate at all. It ain't my dooty. An honest man is entitled to his rest, ain't he? Blessed if I stay in this place at all!"

Ting-a-ling!

"Oh, ring away! I ain't comin' any faster."

While he was mumbling and grumbling, Taggles was, as a matter of fact, making all haste to the gate, and he had now reached it. He held up his lamp, and peered through the thick bronze bars into the roadside beyond.

A feminine figure came into view.

A lady in a long cloak, which reached from her head to her feet, stood there in the darkness. The wide hood of the cloak was pulled over her head, leaving only a tiny portion of her face visible, and she bore a curious resemblance to Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother in the pantomimes.

Taggles glared at her through the gates.

"Which I says——" he began.

"Oh, thank goodness you have come!"

Taggles snorted.

"You ain't got nothin' to thank goodness for yet, ma'am," he replied. "I ain't hopened this 'ere gate."

"Please open it at once."

"Who are you? Whatcher doin' out at this time of night?" demanded Taggles surlily. "'Ow do I know it ain't a plant? There was a burglary here some time back."

"Oh, please——"

"Better go' ome!"

"Pray open the gate!"

"I'm going to bed."

"But——"

"You'd better do the same, ma'am, and I 'ope your 'usband will tell you what he thinks of you when you get 'ome."

"Sir!"

"Good-night, ma'am!"

"Open the gate!"

"Not half!"

"But I am——"

"I'm orf!" said Taggles.

"Stay! I shall report you to Dr. Holmes! My good man, surely you know me!"

"I don't know you," grunted Taggles, who was convinced that he had to do either with a madwoman or an intoxicated person. "I don't know persons who takes their little walks at this 'ere time. If you ain't drunk, go 'ome to bed. If you are drunk, there's a dry ditch over there, where you can get to sleep, and I'm going back to bed to do the same!"

"But, please——"

"Oh, git orf!"

"But—but surely you know me, my good man? I am Miss Fawcett!"

"Hey!"

"I am Miss Priscilla Fawcett!"

"What!"

"My ward is at this school—Tom Merry, of the Shell Form. You surely know me now, Taggles?

Taggles nearly dropped the lamp in his amazement.

He certainly did know Miss Priscilla Fawcett, of Laurel Villa, Huckleberry Heath. Her visits to St. Jim's were neither few nor far between.

Some anxiety for Tom Merry's health and comfort frequently drew her to the old school, where Dr. Holmes, though the most courteous of old gentlemen, sometimes found his patience sorely tried in consequence.

But Taggles would have expected an earthquake as soon as seeing Miss Priscilla upon the Rylcombe road at one o'clock in the morning.

Miss Fawcett pushed back her hood as she spoke, and the lamplight streamed upon her face, and Taggles could have no further doubts.

The school-porter stared at that kind, old face as if it had been the face of a gorgon. If St. James, the original and reverend patron of St. Jim's, had suddenly appeared on the road there, and rung for admission, Taggles could hardly have been more astonished.

"You, ma'am!" he gasped.

"Yes, it is I!"

"But—but——"

"Open the gate, please!"

"But—but——"

Miss Fawcett cast a hurried glance along the dark road behind her.

"Open the gate! Quick! He may be coming!"

"He! Who?"

"Quick—quick!"

Taggles dazedly unlocked the gate. Miss Fawcett came in, and Taggles stared at her blankly.

The old lady caught him by the arm.

"Lock the gate again! Quick!"

"What's the 'urry, ma'am?"

"He may be coming!"

"Who may be?"

"Lock the gates!"

"Oh, werry well, ma'am!"

Taggles turned the key again. Miss Fawcett gave a great gasp of relief as the heavy gate was secured between her and the road.

"Oh, dear—oh, dear! I have been so frightened!" she gasped.

"What about, ma'am?"

"I am sure he has followed me."

"Who has?"

"A hundred pounds is so much."

"A 'undred pounds!" said Taggles, wondering if he was dreaming. "Who's talking about a 'undred pounds?"

"Besides, that would only be a beginning."

"Eh?"

"I refused."

"What?"

"He has followed me, however."

"Which?"

"Oh, I was so frightened."

And Miss Priscilla began to cry. To Taggles's great alarm, she showed signs of fainting. The porter stood perplexed.

"Oh, buck up, ma'am!" he said weakly. "Don't—don't faint. Blest if I know what to do with a faintin' female. Oh, lor!"

For Miss Fawcett had fainted in earnest, and the porter had only just time to catch her as she fell.

CHAPTER 4.

A Surprise for the School.

"'ELP!"

"'Elp!"

It was Taggles who shouted.

The porter stood with the fainting lady supported in his arms, the lamp in his right hand, in imminent risk of setting Miss Priscilla on fire. He could not get rid of either, and his only resource was to summon assistance.

And so he stood where he was and shouted.

"'Elp!"

Taggles's shouts for help, rising crescendo, rang through the shadowy quadrangle.

"'Elp! 'Elp!"

Taggles hoped that Mrs. Taggles would hear him, and come to the rescue, Dame Taggles being about the best person to whom a fainting lady could be entrusted.

Dame Taggles did hear, and she came. But not till she had taken five minutes to dress, and to see that her hair was tidy.

And by the time Dame Taggles arrived on the scene, help was arriving from other quarters.

Taggles's shouts had reached almost every quarter of St. Jim's.

In the School House, Tom Merry was the first to wake in the Shell dormitory, and he started up in bed and listened.

"'Elp! 'Elp!"

The sound came faintly in at the windows from the distance. Tom Merry knew the voice of Taggles, and he jumped out of bed.

A late burglary at St. Jim's was in his mind, and that wild shouting in the middle of the night could only mean that Taggles was in danger.

Many were the little rubs the juniors had had with the school-porter, but that did not make any difference to Tom Merry then.

He jumped into his trousers, yelled to Manners and Lowther, and dashed out of the dormitory.

In the lower hall of the School House he stopped a second to clutch up a walking-stick belonging to Mr. Railton, the House-master, and then he unbarred and unchained the door, and tore out into the quadrangle.

Manners and Lowther were only a few moments behind him.

And in the Fourth-Form dormitory Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and his chums—Blake and Herries and Digby—and a crowd of others, were tumbling into their clothes in hot haste.

Over in the New House, Figgins & Co. woke in the Fourth-Form room, and tumbled up, and they were out almost as soon as Tom Merry.

The latter caught the glimmer of Taggles's lamp at the gate, and dashed towards it at top speed, rolling over once or twice as he stumbled upon unseen obstacles in the darkness.

Meanwhile, Dame Taggles was on the scene; and her astonishment when she saw Miss Priscilla Fawcett in the arms of the porter may be imagined.

Miss Fawcett was coming to a little, and she was moaning.

"It's Miss Fawcett, Jane," said Taggles helplessly. "It's 'er who was a-ringing the blessed bell."

"Dear me!"

"She's fainted," said Taggles. "Take the lamp, and I'll carry 'er in. You can do something for her, Jane."

"Oh, oh, oh!" moaned Miss Fawcett.

"She's coming to, poor soul," said kind-hearted Mrs. Taggles. "Bring her in!"

And Miss Fawcett, between the two, was carried into the porter's lodge, and laid upon a sofa in the little sitting-room.

A minute later, Tom Merry was looking in at the door.

"What's the row, Taggles? Anybody hurt?"

"No, sir," gasped Taggles, wiping his perspiring brow; "I ain't 'urt!"

"Then what the dickens were you making that fearful row about?" demanded Tom Merry indignantly.

"You see——"

"Here, I've bundled out of bed, and buzzed off with nothing on but pyjamas and trousers, and—— Oh, I beg your pardon, Mrs. Taggles; I didn't know you were up!" said Tom Merry, turning red. "But really, Taggles——"

"She's fainted, sir."

"What—Mrs. Taggles?"

"No. Miss——"

"Bai Jove!" broke in a voice over Tom Merry's shoulder. "What's all the wow about, deah boy?"

And Arthur Augustus looked in through his eyeglass. The swell of St. Jim's had dressed in haste. He had put a slipper on one bare foot, and a boot on the other. He had Blake's trousers on, and Digby's jacket, and no shirt or collar at all. But he had not forgotten his eyeglass.

"There's no row," said Tom Merry. "It's Taggles has had a giddy nightmare, that's all."

"Which it ain't," said the porter.

"What is it, then?"

"It's Miss Fawcett——"

"Whom?"

"Miss Fawcett."

"My old governess?"

"Yes."

Tom Merry stared blankly at Taggles.

"What about her?" he said. "What are you talking about, Taggy?"

"She's come."

"Come—where?"

"'Ere," said Taggles.

Tom Merry gave a jump.

"Miss Fawcett—here!"

"She's in my settin'-room," said Taggles. "Which she has fainted, but she's a-comin' round. She's just rung me up, at one o'clock in the morning. Which she thinks that someone was a-follering her, but I didn't see nobody."

"Bai Jove!"

Tom Merry's face was a study.

He remembered Miss Fawcett's strange letter. On account of that he had intended to go home the first thing in the morning. She had anticipated him by coming to St. Jim's.

But what did it mean? What could possibly have induced the usually correct and almost painfully precise old lady to arrive at the school at this unearthly hour? And whom could she have imagined to be following her?

Tom Merry stepped into the lodge quickly.

"Can I see her, Mrs. Taggles?"

"Yes, Master Merry. She's asking for you."

Tom Merry entered the little sitting-room.

Miss Fawcett, looking very pale and worn, was propped up upon cushions and pillows on the sofa, but she was quite conscious now. Her face lighted up as Tom Merry came in.

"Tom! My darling Tommy!"

Tom ran towards her.

"What is the matter, dear?"

He put his arm round her neck, and Miss Fawcett clung to him and burst into tears.

"My darling! I feel safe with you! Don't leave me!"

CHAPTER 5.

The Mystery of Miss Priscilla.

TOM MERRY did not go to bed again that night. From Miss Fawcett he had received no explanation of her strange visit; nor did he care to question her, in her troubled and hysterical state.

The old lady was content to have him sitting with her, and to hold his hand, as if to assure herself that he was not leaving her.

Miss Fawcett slept by fits and starts, propped on pillows on the sofa, and Tom Merry was content to forgo the rest of his night's sleep for the sake of remaining with her, for the comfort his presence gave her.

The other fellows went back to bed, discussing the strange occurrence, and unable to make either head or tail of it.

Miss Priscilla was so precise in her habits, that it was impossible to explain this sudden freak, unless she had taken leave of her senses.

Tom Merry did not know what to make of it; but he understood that the same worry which had caused Miss Fawcett to write that strange letter the previous day, had caused her to abruptly fly from her home at Huckleberry Heath.

What could it all mean?

She had imagined that she was followed; but no pursuer had turned up near St. Jim's, so far as could be discovered. Was it merely a fancy—or had someone been threatening the old lady? At the latter thought, Tom Merry's eyes blazed, and his fist clenched. But who could it be—and why? Surely it was all a fancy!

Dr. Holmes had come out to inquire into the disturbance, and he had tried to persuade Miss Priscilla to come to his house, and take the room she usually occupied on her visits to the school. But the good old lady was not in a state to move. She remained in the porter's lodge, and Tom Merry remained with her, the Head giving him permission to sit up with his old friend.

Dr. Holmes and Mr. Railton saw the boys back to their beds; and then, before they parted for the night, they exchanged a curious look.

"Miss Fawcett has been alarmed about something," the Head remarked.

"Apparently so."

"Merry showed me a very strange letter from her yesterday, which seemed to indicate a disturbed state of mind. I had given him permission to visit her in the morning."

"Ah!"

"She has come here instead."

"She seems to be greatly alarmed about something."

"I have a great respect for Miss Fawcett," said the Head. "She has subscribed liberally to the chapel restoration fund, and in other ways she has always shown a kind heart and a most estimable character."

"She has indeed," said Mr. Railton heartily.

"I am always glad to see her," said the Head, as if trying to convince himself on the subject.

"Naturally so."

"But I cannot disguise from myself the fact that when she is here, there is a certain—a certain amount of restiveness below stairs," said the Head uneasily.

"I have observed it."

"Miss Fawcett has the kindest heart in the world. If she can help by advice or assistance, she will always do so."

The House-master smiled slightly.

"I have noticed that, too, sir."

"Unfortunately, this advice and assistance is not always received in the spirit in which it is given."

"It is very unfortunate."

"Mrs. Mimms has sometimes complained."

Mr. Railton nodded.

"The maids have complained to Mrs. Mimms."

"I have heard so."

"A prolonged stay here by Miss Fawcett is, curiously enough, always the cause of some trouble in the household, although her intentions are of the very best."

The House-master nodded again. He knew it well enough, and he knew what the doctor felt about it.

"In short, Mr. Railton, do you—do you think that Miss Fawcett's intention is to pay us a prolonged visit?" said the Head, colouring a little.

Mr. Railton looked grave.

"It looks to be like it, sir."

"Ahem! I should be far from wishing to appear inhospitable," said Dr. Holmes, with a sigh. "But—however, I suppose it will be all right. Good-night, Mr. Railton."

"Good-night, sir!"

And they went to bed.

The next morning there was only one topic being discussed in the School House; and the New House as well, for that matter.

It was the mysterious midnight visit of Miss Fawcett.

The fellows were everywhere on the look-out for her, to catch a glimpse of the old lady who had caused so great a furore.

When Miss Fawcett appeared in the quadrangle, leaning on Tom Merry's arm, and making her way towards the Head's house, there was a general turning of glances in her direction.

The old lady looked very pale and worn; and Tom Merry looked pale, too, from want of sleep.

Miss Fawcett hardly noticed that she was being looked at.

Some of the fellows were grinning, but most of them were quiet enough, and many of them sympathetic.

Mellish, the cad of the Fourth, was highly amused. He grinned at Gore, of the Shell, the fellow he usually chummed with.

"Rum go," he remarked. "The old lady must have dreamed that Tom Merry got his feet wet, and bolted off in the middle of the night to see whether it was true."

Gore snorted.

"Nice-looking, historic figure, ain't she?" went on Mellish. "What I particularly like about her is her face. It reminds one of a visit to the British Museum—— Oh!"

He broke off as Gore took hold of his ear between finger and thumb.

"Ow! Leggo! Yow!"

"Shut up, then!"

Mellish stared at Gore in blank amazement. Gore was generally quite ready to enter into any caddish joke.

"Wh-wh-what's the matter with you, Gore?"

"Nothing, you young cad!"

"Wh-what! Why——"

"Shut up, that's all!"

Mellish jerked himself away, and gave Gore a venomous look.

"You—you rotter!" he said. "This is what comes of being sacked. I've noticed that you've been putting on self-righteous airs ever since you were expelled, and the Head allowed you to come back."

"Oh, get away!" growled Gore.

And he walked away, leaving Mellish staring after him with mingled surprise and spite.

Meanwhile, Tom Merry and his old governess had reached the Head's house.

There the old lady went in, kissing Tom Merry at the door—much to the delight of a group of fags—and the door closed behind her.

Tom Merry came towards the School House, with a grave and thoughtful expression upon his face.

Manners and Lowther joined him at once, and the chums of Study No. 6—Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy of the Fourth Form—strolled over towards him. It was nearly time for breakfast in the School House.

"Well?" said Lowther and Manners together.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"I can't make it out," he said.

"Why has she come?"

"I don't know."

"What has happened at Laurel Villa?"

"Nothing, that I know of."

"Then what does it mean?"

"It's a giddy mystery."

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "As an amateur detective, you know, I wathah think I ought to take up the mystewy, you know, and wun it to earth—I mean, unwiddle the secwet, you know. That ass Skimpole thinks he can do the detective business, but he can't, you know!"

"Miss Fawcett was frightened about something," said Tom Merry. "She seemed to think that somebody was following her."

"Bai Jove!"

"But——"

"I've thought of somethin', deah boys!"

"Go it, Gussy!"

"With my twained intellect——"

"Oh, blow your trained intellect!" said Monty Lowther. "If you've thought of anything sensible, let's have it!"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Well, ring off then!"

"I wefuse to wing off. With my twained intellect as an amateur detective, I can see deepah into the mattah than you chaps, and I have thought of a theowy."

"Go ahead!" said Tom Merry, smiling a little.

"I am makin' my deductions fwom the circs of the case, and fwom the lettah Miss Pwiscillah w'ote to Tom Mewwy."

"Fire away!"

"Miss Pwiscillah is fwightened about somethin'. She has suddenly wun away fwom home. She thinks she was followed. She has been talkin' about a hundwed pounds, and sayin' she could not give so much away."

"To a bazaar," said Lowther.

"It is not quite cleah about the bazaar, deah boy. Now my ideah is that some wascal has been twyin' to get money fwom Miss Fawcett, and thweatenin' her if she doesn't shell out, you know."

Tom Merry started.

He had very little faith in D'Arcy's abilities as an amateur detective—and, indeed, Gussy's essays in that line had been extremely comical so far—but out of the mouths of babes and sucklings—— The theory Arthur Augustus was propounding seemed certainly to account for what had happened.

Miss Fawcett was just the kind of timid old lady whom some unscrupulous rascal might attempt to extort money from.

"By Jove!" said Jack Blake. "I really think that Gussy has hit the bullseye!"

"In a case like that, what you wequire is a fellow of tact and judgment!" said Arthur Augustus modestly. "With my twained intellect——"

"I shouldn't wonder if there was something in it," said Tom Merry abruptly. "I'll ask Miss Fawcett as soon as I can, and if it turns out so——"

"In that case, deah boy, I will take up the case pwofessionally, and sift it to the bottom!" said Arthur Augustus, in his best Sherlock-Holmes-Sexton-Blake manner.

"Good wheeze!" said Blake. "The rascal will have plenty of time to escape if Gussy gets after him, so somebody will benefit."

"Weally, Blake——"

"Hallo, that's the breakfast-bell!"

"Undah the circs——"

"Come in to brekker, fathead!"

"I decline to be called a fathead! Undah the circs, I think I had bettah go and ask Miss Fawcett for a few details!"

"No, you won't," said Blake, dragging his elegant chum away. "You'll come in to brekker."

"Weally, Blake——"

"Take his other arm, Herries."

"Right-ho!"

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"Come on!"

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was run into the School House dining-room, and planted at the Fourth-Form table before he could recover his breath.

CHAPTER 6.

Miss Priscilla Explains.

"YOU must have been very surprised, Dr. Holmes!" Miss Priscilla Fawcett made that undeniable statement as she sat in the Head's study after breakfast.

The Head smiled deprecatingly.

"Perhaps a little, Miss Fawcett."

Miss Fawcett was looking much better now. Tom Merry had been told to go and lie down instead of attending morning lessons, which he was glad enough to do. He had stretched himself on his bed in the Shell dormitory in the School House, and dropped off to sleep at once.

Miss Fawcett had called in at the Head's study to explain. Dr. Holmes was very busy in the mornings, and he had to take the Sixth Form in Greek shortly, but the good old doctor resigned himself to his fate, and worked up the most courteous of smiles to greet his visitor from Huckleberry Heath.

"In fact, you must have been astonished," said Miss Priscilla.

"Well, yes, somewhat."

"It was so—so extraordinary a step to take."

"Perhaps so."

"I hope you were not too much shocked!"

"Oh, Miss Fawcett!"

"But I had a very powerful motive," said Miss Priscilla. "Under the circumstances, I felt that I could do nothing but rush off at once to my darling boy!"

"Ahem!"

"I feel so much safer when my sweet Tommy is with me!"

"No doubt."

"I left Laurel Villa in great haste—without even allowing myself time to bring my darling parrot with me!" said Miss Fawcett, showing signs of tears.

The Head looked sympathetic, but in his heart he was devoutly glad that Miss Fawcett had not allowed herself sufficient time to bring her darling parrot.

"I was so frightened!" said Miss Fawcett; and to the Head's great alarm she showed signs of a return of hysterics.

Dr. Holmes started to his feet.

"My dear Miss Fawcett! My dear lady! Can I get your smelling-salts? Can I——"

"I have them, thank you!" said Miss Fawcett, sniffing at them. "There, I feel better now! I have been through terrible experiences, sir!"

"I am sorry to hear it."

"I would not worry my darling boy with them, but I can confide in you, sir."

"Oh, pray do!"

"I trust you are not in a hurry this morning?"

The Head thought of the Sixth Form, now going into the class-room for the Greek lesson, and groaned inwardly. But courtesy came first, especially to such an estimable lady as Miss Priscilla Fawcett.

"Pray take your own time, Miss Fawcett."

"Thank you very much! I have received a letter," said Miss Priscilla. "You can imagine into what a state of terror I was thrown!"

The Head coughed.

"Ahem! Is there anything so—so very unusual in receiving a—a letter, Miss Fawcett?"

"Such a letter, sir—such a letter!"

"Indeed!"

"A demand for money," said Miss Fawcett; "for a hundred pounds."

"Oh!"

"From a man I do not even know."

"Dear me!"

"And he uttered the most terrible threats of what he would do if I did not send him the money."

"Shocking!"

"I was so frightened!"

"I am not surprised, Miss Fawcett! What did this scoundrel threaten you with? It is evidently a base attempt at blackmail!"

"He—he threatened to call on me——"

"Oh! Is that all?"

"And to set fire to my house."

The Head restrained a smile. Miss Fawcett had evidently been selected as a victim by an unscrupulous blackmailer, but his threats were too absurd to frighten any but a timid old lady.

"You have the letter now, Miss Fawcett?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Have you been to the police?"

"There is only one policeman at Huckleberry Heath," said poor Miss Fawcett. "He is also a gardener. He is a very good gardener, but he is not very clever as a policeman."

"Ah! It is a—a secluded place, I think?"

"Yes, Dr. Holmes—a very quiet place. I showed him the letter, however. But it was useless—it was written in invisible writing."

"In what! Then how did you read it?"

"The writing was visible when I read it, you understand, but shortly afterwards it faded from the paper."

"Oh!"

"I have the letter here," said Miss Fawcett, opening the little bag she carried and selecting an envelope from among a collection of smelling-salts, letters, hairpins, handkerchief and purse, and so forth. "Pray look at it."

She extended the envelope to Dr. Holmes, who took it somewhat absent-mindedly. He was thinking of the Sixth, who were now waiting for him.

Dr. Holmes extracted the letter from the envelope, and looked at it. It was a sheet of common cream-coloured note-paper, and quite blank. Dr. Holmes adjusted his glasses and looked again. So far as he could see, the paper had never borne writing of any sort. Then he looked at the envelope—it was quite blank.

"My dear madam!"

"Yes, dear Dr. Holmes?"

"This letter was sent to you?"

"Yes."

"And the writing faded since?"

"Yes."

"But the postmark could not have faded," said the Head. "Are you sure that you have made no mistake in the matter?"

"Quite certain, sir."

"Then how——"

"The letter did not come through the post."

"Oh!" said Dr. Holmes.

"It was addressed to me in the same writing as the letter, and put into the letter-box at Laurel Villa," explained Miss Fawcett. "Hannah brought it to me. I imagined it to be some tradesman's advertisement at first—till I opened it. Then I was very much frightened."

"Dear me!"

"By the time I had taken it to the policeman, the ink had faded. The man seemed to think that I was suffering from some delusion."

"Dear me!"

"Then I went to Mr. Dodds for advice. You remember Mr. Dodds, the dear curate of Huckleberry Heath."

"Quite well; a very estimable young man."

"He was very courteous," said Miss Fawcett; "but he seemed to share the policeman's opinion, that I was under a delusion. He did not say so, but I could see very well that it was his opinion."

"Very remarkable," murmured the Head, who was perfectly convinced himself that Miss Fawcett was under a delusion.

"Is it not? I returned to Laurel Villa. I had written to my darling Tommy——"

"Yes, he showed me your letter, madam."

"The dear boy! He must have been anxious."

"He certainly was anxious."

"My sweet darling! But when night came on, doctor, and I remembered that fearful man's threat of setting my house on fire, I—I lost my courage. I felt that I must be with my dear boy for protection."

"I—I quite understand."

"And so I left suddenly, without even bringing my parrot. I caught the last train. I arrived at Rylcombe by the last local from Wayland."

"Terrible!"

"The cabman was gone to bed, and I had to walk from the station."

"My dear Miss Fawcett!"

"I lost my way in the lanes, in seeking to escape the wretch who was following me."

The Head started. Was there something tangible in the story after all.

"You were followed, Miss Fawcett?"

"Yes, sir."

"You saw the man?"

"Well, no, I did not see him, but I felt his presence," exclaimed Miss Fawcett. "You can understand, can you not, doctor?"

Dr. Holmes could easily understand how every shadow in the dark lanes had been full of terror for the dismayed old lady.

"Yes, I—I think so, Miss Fawcett."

"I was so frightened when Taggles delayed opening the gate. At every moment I expected to feel that dreadful man's clutch on my shoulder."

"It must have been terrible."

"It was, indeed. But I feel so safe now that I am under the same roof as my darling Tommy."

"I—I suppose so."

"Now, what would you advise me to do, sir?"

"I—I really do not know, madam."

"I cannot return to Laurel Villa in such a state of terror," said Miss Fawcett, applying to her smelling-salts again.

"I—I suppose not, Miss Fawcett," said the Head, in dismay.

"What would you advise, sir?"

"I—I should send this letter to Scotland Yard, for the

police to investigate the matter," said Dr. Halmes slowly. "They can test the paper, and discover whether it ever bore any writing in invisible ink."

"That does not need discovering, Dr. Holmes. I could repeat the letter almost word for word."

"Er—yes; but—but the police, like Mr. Dodds might imagine that it was all a delusion on your part," stammered the Head.

"Ah, yes, I did not think of that!"

"Then if they discover signs of invisible writing, they will take the proper steps to discover the blackmailer."

"You relieve me very much, Dr. Holmes. Perhaps you would be kind enough to communicate with the detective department, and send them the letter?"

"With pleasure, Miss Fawcett."

"I suppose the matter will take some time."

"Probably a few days."

"And in the meantime——"

"Ah, yes—er—in the meantime——"

"With your permission——"

"Oh, certainly!"

"I should be glad to remain at the school for a few days."

"Oh, yes, delighted!" murmured the Head.

"I should feel so much safer with my darling Tommy."

"Er—naturally!"

"And the wretch could hardly come here and set the school on fire."

"Er—hardly."

"So, if I should not incommode anyone——"

"My dear Miss Fawcett——"

"I will stay a few days, until this matter is cleared up."

"I will send the letter to Scotland Yard by the very next post," said Dr. Holmes, with great fervour.

"Thank you so much. Of course," said Miss Fawcett, with a winning smile, "I shall not eat the bread of idleness while I am here. I never was an idle woman. I shall try to make myself useful."

"Oh, no, not at all!"

"Ah, but I shall insist, my dear sir. I have always believed that it is every woman's duty to set the maids an example of industry."

"Ye-e-e-s; but——"

"Besides, I could give some advice and assistance to the House-dame."

"But——"

"And perhaps improve some of the arrangements for the comfort of the boys."

"Oh!"

"I assure you that I shall not be idle. But perhaps I am detaining you."

"Well, as a matter of fact, my class has been waiting a quarter of an hour," said the unfortunate doctor.

"Dear me! Pray go at once. I feel ever so much reassured after this talk with you, Dr. Holmes. I am going to be very useful."

"But——"

"You think I cannot work," said Miss Fawcett, with a smile. "You think I am too old."

"Oh, dear no! But——"

"I shall prove it to you. I shall dust your study while you are gone to your class."

The Head nearly fell on the floor.

"But—but——"

"Not a word, sir. I shall do it. It will be no trouble at all."

The Head looked at Miss Fawcett. He thought of his waiting and wondering class. He thought of the papers in his study. But he felt powerless to deal with the dear old lady from Huckleberry Heath.

He murmured something and rushed from the study. He came into the class-room where the Sixth were kicking their heels, with a red face and a rustling gown. But the Head's mind was wandering that morning, and the Sixth had the most surprising lesson in Greek that they had ever received. When the Head told them that Achilles had sulked in his tent because he had received a letter written in invisible ink, they gasped. But the Head hardly knew what he was saying. He was thinking of the kind old lady at work in his study with a duster, and the best intentions in the world.

CHAPTER 7.

Miss Priscilla Makes Herself Useful.

IT was a quarter of an hour before Dr. Holmes left the Sixth Form class-room, and made his way towards his study again. He met Mr. Railton in the passage, and the School House master looked in amazement at the doctor's disturbed face.

"Has anything happened, sir. Miss Fawcett——"

"I—I left her in my study, Mr. Railton."

"Yes?" said the House-master, wondering why that should make the Head look so disturbed.

"And she is going to make herself useful while she stays at St. Jim's."

"She is staying then?"

"For a few days."

"Oh!"

"She is going to set an example to the maids."

"Oh!"

"And advise the House-dame——"

"H'm!"

"And look after the comfort of the boys——"

"H'm!"

"And now she is dusting my study!"

"Great Sc—ahem—I—I mean, dear me."

"And my examination papers are there, and—and my notes for my book on 'Æschylus'," said the Head.

"Pray do not let me detain you, then," said Mr. Railton hastily.

The Head almost ran back to his study.

He opened the door quickly, and looked in, his heart in his mouth. Any woman with a duster is a terror to a literary man; but Miss Fawcett, with her tidy ways, her desire to have everything neat and in its place, her deadly determination to have no dust and no scraps of paper about—— No wonder the doctor trembled.

Miss Fawcett was busy.

She looked towards the Head as he came in, with a charming smile.

"I am very busy already, as you see, doctor."

"Ye-e-e-s."

The Head glanced at the waste-paper basket beside his desk. It had been emptied that morning by the maids, but it was full to the top now.

"You—you have been—er——"

"I have put the papers tidy on your desk," said Miss Fawcett. "I have cleared away all the paper that was scrawled on, and put the blank paper tidy, as you see."

Dr. Holmes sat down.

The paper that was scrawled on contained his notes for his book on Æschylus and his tragedies—a book that the Head firmly believed was destined to create quite a sensation in a score of dusty old studies in the quiet closes of Oxford.

Miss Fawcett had cheerfully deposited the work of three years' leisure in the waste-paper basket. It was a mercy there was no fire in the room, or the devastation might have been irreparable.

"I have taken a nice new pen from the box for you," went on Miss Fawcett. "I have thrown the old one away. It was almost worn out."

That pen was, indeed, almost worn out, but it had been the Head's familiar companion for years, and he would not have exchanged it for a new one of solid gold. He could only gasp.

"And how dreadfully careless you men are with books," said Miss Fawcett, smiling. "Do you know, I found no

fewer than eleven volumes lying on the table or desk, instead of being in their places in the bookcase."

"Oh!"

"And all of them had the leaves turned down in various places at the corners," said Miss Priscilla. "I never could understand why men did not use bookmarkers, and why they ever wanted to mark so many places in a book at once. However, I have turned back all the corners now, and smoothed them out as much as possible."

The Head almost groaned.

All the marked places in his books of reference were lost now, and he would have many an hour of hard work before he found them all again.

"A woman's hand makes so much difference in a man's room," said Miss Fawcett.

"It does!" gasped the Head. "It does, indeed!"

"I have now finished here."

"Thank goodness! I—I mean thank you very much."

"I will now go and see if I can make myself useful elsewhere."

"But——"

"I am determined to be useful. No, do not trouble to come. I know my way to Mrs. Mimms' room."

"Yes, but——"

"She will be so pleased to see me again."

And Miss Fawcett left the study.

Slowly and solemnly the Head extracted his valuable lucubrations upon the subject of Æschylus and his tragedies, from the crammed recesses of the waste-paper basket.

He smoothed them out on his desk, almost with tears in his eyes.

It was not surprising that Miss Fawcett's untrained eye had taken the jottings of mingled English and Greek for something of no importance; but to the Head they were as the treasures of Golconda.

"Dear me!" murmured the Head. "Miss Fawcett is an estimable lady—a most estimable lady, but—— Dear me!"

CHAPTER 8.

Rival Detectives.

TOM MERRY joined the Shell in time for third lesson. The sleep had refreshed him, and he felt no worse for having sat up the second half of the night with Miss Fawcett. But he was still feeling somewhat worried about his old governess, and that worry brought a thoughtful shade to his brow.

He found the Shell still greatly interested in the sudden appearance of Miss Fawcett at St. Jim's, and talking about it in whispers, while Mr. Linton, the Form-master, vainly strove to fix their attention upon the configuration of the coast of South America.

Tom Merry sat down, at his place between Monty Lowther and Skimpole. Skimpole blinked at him through his spectacles.

There was a great deal of thought in the countenance of Herbert Skimpole, of the Shell; but that thought was not being expended upon geography.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth, was not the only junior at St. Jim's who had allowed the adventures of Sherlock Holmes to get into his head, and imagined himself to be a born detective.

Skimpole, of the Shell, was fully persuaded that he was as far ahead of Sherlock Holmes as Sherlock Holmes was ahead of any real detective.

For Skimpole was a genius. Anybody who had listened patiently to his conversation must infallibly have discovered that he was a genius; and if that discovery had not been made, it was probably because he could induce nobody to listen patiently to his conversation.

For his conversation ran upon 'ographies, 'ologies, and 'isms; and 'isms, 'ologies, and 'ographies were not beloved of the Lower Forms at St. Jim's.

Skimpole was very short-sighted, and he never knew when the Form-master's eye was upon him. Hence when he talked in class he was generally detected; and he often talked in class. Skimpole was of a Socialistic turn of mind, and believed in the full liberty of anybody to make an ass of himself if he liked—at least, that was how Monty Lowther described it. And Lowther was his Form-fellow, and ought to have known. Skimpole put it differently; but nobody ever listened to Skimpole.

Skimpole poked Tom Merry in the ribs with a long, bony forefinger as he sat down, and Tom Merry gave a gasp. Mr. Linton stared straight at them, a fact of which Herbert Skimpole was blissfully unconscious.

"I say, Merry——"

"Ow! You ass!"

"I hear that Miss Fawcett has arrived at St. Jim's."

"Yes. Shut up!"

"I hear that there is a mystery——"

"Shut up, you ass!"

"And so I——"

"Can't you see Linton looking, you duffer?" whispered Tom Merry.

"No. I do not see very well, and——"

"Shut up!"

"But——"

"Skimpole!" thundered Mr. Linton.

The Form-master could hardly believe his eyes at seeing the amateur Socialist talking away under his very nose, as it were. Mr. Linton's face grew red, and he picked up his pointer in a businesslike way.

Skimpole blinked at him.

"Yes, sir?"

"You were talking."

"I was only saying to Merry——"

"You were talking!" thundered the master of the Shell.

"That I was quite willing to solve——"

"Skimpole!"

"The mystery of Miss Fawcett, and——"

"Take a hundred lines, Skimpole."

"Certainly, sir. But——"

"Another word and I shall cane you, Skimpole."

And even Skimpole left off at that.

Mr. Linton looked very angry for some time, and kept an eye on Skimpole; but Tom Merry was careful not to allow the amateur detective to start another talk. The class was dismissed at last, and Skimpole blinked round for Tom Merry as the Shell poured out into the broad, flagged passage.

The Fourth Form had already been released, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was also looking for Tom Merry.

The two amateur detectives found Tom Merry at the same moment. Tom had tried to escape into the quadrangle, but they cornered him on the steps. Skimpole took him by a button, in the objectionable way he had, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy tapped him on the shoulder.

"I want to speak to you, Tom Mewwy."

"Excuse me, D'Arcy, I want to speak to Merry."

"Oh, that's all wight; you can speak anothah time."

"It is important——"

"It can hardly be so important as my wemarks. Hold on, Tom Mewy!"

"Pray do not go, Merry!"

Tom Merry had scuttled down the steps. The two detectives scuttled after him, and cornered him again under the big elm in front of the School House.

"Pway wemain, deah boy."

"Just a minute, Merry."

"Look here, Skimmay, you ass——"

"Look here, D'Arcy, you fathead——"

"I wefuse to be chawactewised as a fathead. I——"

"You called me an ass."

"Yaas, but my wemark was in stwict accordance with the facts."

"Really, D'Arcy——"

"Pway buzz off, Skimmay. I want to speak to Mewwy most particulahly, as I am goin' to solve the mystewy of Miss Pwiscillah."

"Dear me! That is the case I am engaged upon."

"Bai Jove!"

Skimpole produced a huge notebook, and a blunt pencil, of which he proceeded to lick the point. He blinked at Tom Merry, who was laughing, apparently not much impressed with the importance of either D'Arcy's or Skimpole's investigations.

"Pray let me have the details, Tom Merry."

"Tom Mewwy is goin' to give me the details, Skimmay."

"Nothing of the sort."

"Weally, Skimmay——"

"You asses," said Tom Merry, laughing, "there aren't any details. You know as much about the matter as I do."

D'Arcy took a little Russia-leather bound, gilt-edged pocket-book from his waistcoat, and opened a silver pencil.

"I am weady to take down all you say, Tom Mewwy."

"I also am ready, Merry."

"Rats!"

Skimpole began to write "Ra——," and then checked himself.

"Really, Merry, that is not a detail."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wegard you as an ass, Skimmy."

"I regard you as a feeble, forlorn specimen of the worn-out relics of a degenerate and bloated aristocracy," said Skimpole.

"Bai Jove! Pway hold my notebook, Tom Mewwy, while I give Skimpole a feahful thwashin'."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pray do not proceed to violence, D'Arcy. As a sincere Socialist, it is impossible for me to strike any person, even when assaulted."

"Bai Jove!"

"But as a Determinist I should strike you with violence,

the blame of my action, if any, falling upon my heredity or my environment."

"I wegard you as an ass, Skimmay. I will not thwash you, on second thoughts, as you are a harmless lunatic."

"It is a common circumstance for persons whose brains are rocky to imagine that they discern the traces of insanity in others."

"Bai Jove!"

"However, to leave personalities, and come to business. I am quite ready to take down—— Dear me, where is Tom Merry?"

And Skimpole blinked round at the empty air, in search of the hero of the Shell. Tom Merry had walked away, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was running after him.

"Dear me!" murmured Skimpole. "I should have thought that Merry would be glad to have this mystery cleared up, if only for the sake of his respected governess. I wonder what has happened? Perhaps Miss Fawcett has committed a murder, and has come to St. Jim's to hide from the police. She certainly does not look like a homicidal person, but a detective cannot afford to trust to appearances. Sherlock Holmes and Sexton Blake never trusted to appearances. In a moment of rage she may have smitten Hannah to the ground. I must investigate."

Tom Merry was running now, with the idea of giving Arthur Augustus D'Arcy a little exercise. Holding his notebook in one hand, and his silk hat on with the other, D'Arcy dashed in pursuit of the hero of the Shell.

Tom was skirting round the gym., and Skimpole, blinking after him, guessed that it was his intention to get round that building and dodge into the School House.

And so Skimpole, with a chuckle at his own cunning, started running round the gym. on the opposite side.

He was thus certain to meet Tom Merry face to face if the hero of the Shell kept on.

But Tom Merry had no intention of doing so.

At the rear of the gym. were several windows, in and out of which the juniors not infrequently chased one another when elder eyes were not upon them.

Tom Merry reached the back of the building well ahead of Arthur Augustus, and popped into one of the windows in a twinkling.

Skimpole came dashing round the corner, and Arthur Augustus came dashing round the other at top speed.

There was a terrific bump as the two met.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Tom Merry from the window.

"Ow!"

"Gweat Scott!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sat down with a bump, and Skimpole rolled over on the ground. They both sat up, gasping, and looked at one another.

"Bai Jove! You ass!"

"You fathead!"

"I wegard you as a dangewous lunatic."

"I look upon you as an unspeakable idiot."

"You uttah duffah!"

"You fearful dummy!"

"Why did you wun into me?"

"Why did you run into me?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

D'Arcy jammed his eyeglass into his eye, and looked towards the window, in which was framed the convulsed face of Tom Merry.

The hero of the Shell was roaring with laughter. The meeting of the two amateur detectives had been comical enough to a third party.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see any cause for this wibald laughtah."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I also have no perception of any adequate foundation for this unseemly merriment," said Skimpole. "Under the circumstances——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

With a final yell, Tom Merry disappeared from the window. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy staggered to his feet.

"Bai Jove, he's gone!"

"It's your fault, D'Arcy. I have a feeling that he will avoid us now."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"He does not wish the mystery to be solved."

"Apparently not."

"That would seem to imply that Tom Merry has a guilty knowledge of the secret," said Skimpole seriously. "He may have been accessory to the robbery."

"What wobbery?"

"Suppose Miss Fawcett has committed a burglary, for instance——"

"You uttah ass!"

"A detective cannot afford to be a respecter of persons," said Skimpole sagely. "A detective is bound to suspect everybody until the culprit is discovered. Suppose Miss Fawcett has raided a jeweller's shop, for instance——"

"You feahful ass!"

"She may have brought the plunder here for Tom Merry to hide in his study. He was minding something for somebody once in his study, you know."

"I wegard you as a fwabjous ass!"

"Time will show," said Skimpole, as he rose to his feet. "I have had a painful shock; but I do not mind that, in the cause of truth. I shall shortly have the whole case at my finger-tips, and let the guilty beware!"

And Skimpole put his big notebook into his pocket, and walked away with a frown on his bony forehead, which indicated that great thoughts were going on within.

CHAPTER 9.

Many Remedies.

"TOMMY!"

Tom Merry halted.

He had just reached the steps of the School House, and was about to go in, when Miss Priscilla Fawcett appeared in the doorway.

The appearance of Miss Priscilla drew glances from all quarters.

The good old lady was looking more herself now, and her face was less pale and worried. At St. Jim's, with her dear Tommy so near at hand, she felt safe from the blackmailer, whether he was a real or an imaginary person.

Tom Merry did not particularly enjoy being called "Tommy" before the fellows. But Miss Priscilla never could understand his feelings on that subject; and, as a matter of fact, Tom Merry never explained them to her.

Miss Fawcett had always been goodness itself to him, and he was not the kind of fellow to return even overflowing affection with ingratitude.

If Miss Fawcett did not realise that he was not a little boy still, and did not understand that a sturdy fellow getting on for fifteen did not exactly like being kissed and fondled in public—well, it couldn't be helped. But Tom Merry would have been the last fellow in the world to say or do anything to wound the old lady's feelings on the subject.

"Tommy!"

"Yes, dear?"

"My darling Tommy, how well you look this morning!"

Mellish, of the Fourth, grinned round at the other fellows.

"This is worth watching," he murmured. "There's no charge for admission, but it's better than the monkeys at the Zoo."

And some of the fags sniggered.

"You were disturbed in your rest last night," went on Miss Priscilla, drawing Tom toward her, and kissing him on both cheeks, apparently unconscious of the fact that she had a highly interested and amused audience. "I hope you are not feeling any ill effects, my love?"

Tom Merry turned pink.

"Not at all, dear."

"You have a lovely colour."

"Oh, I've just been running, you know!"

"I hope you have not been over-exerting yourself, my darling? You know how delicate you are!"

Tom Merry grinned.

"I'm as tough as a hazel-nut, dear."

"Oh, my darling, you know we can never agree on that point! Your poor, dear father might never have been killed by those dreadful Afghans if he had taken more care of his health. You must remember that you are not strong. I hope that this colour in your cheeks is not merely hectic."

"Oh, I'm all right, dear!"

"I hope you are! Did you get your feet wet in the rain yesterday?"

Tom Merry's pink cheeks became quite red.

"N-no," he stammered. "I say, would you like to have a look at the study while you're here?"

"Yes, presently, dearest Tommy. Have you used up all the Purple Pills for Pining Patients I sent you in my last letter?"

"Oh, no; there are quite a lot left!"

"Let me know immediately you want some more."

"I will; I'll write at once."

"Have you tried the Little Lozenges?"

"Oh, no; not yet!"

"They are really very good. They may be taken in any numbers at any time, but preferably a dozen of them before and after meals."

"I'll remember."

"About your chest——"

"I wish you'd come and look at the study," said Tom Merry, whose cheeks were on fire as he heard suppressed sniggers in all directions.

"So I will, my dear. But your delicate little chest——"

There was a terrific bump as the rival detectives met. "Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry from the window.

"This way!"

"I have been anxious——"

"Up the stairs, dear."

"I was thinking——"

"It's the next passage."

And the kind old lady from Huckleberry Heath was ushered into Tom Merry's study in the Shell passage.

Outside the School House the fellows were in a roar.

Mellish wiped his eyes.

"Touching, ain't it?" he remarked.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Did anybody notice whether Tom Merry was wearing flannel next to his skin?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, Gore, let's get up to the Shell passage, and——"

"And what?" said Gore, turning upon Mellish, and fixing his eyes on his face.

Mellish retreated a step. He had forgotten for the moment the new line that the cad of the Shell seemed to be taking.

"I've got a wheeze for taking a rise out of the old lady."

"You can keep your rotten wheezes to yourself."

"Look here——"

"Oh, go and eat coke!"

And Gore stalked off.

"My hat," murmured Mellish, staring at him, "what little game is he playing? Is he hard up, and wanting to borow tin of Tom Merry? Of course, it's all humbug! But what's his little game?"

And the worthy Mellish pondered over that for a long time without being able to find any solution to the mystery.

CHAPTER 10.

Nobody wants to be Selfish.

TOM MERRY had taken Miss Fawcett to his study to get her out of the crowd, who were so amused by her affectionate inquiries after his health. He had not had time to think upon the matter; if he had done so, he might have remembered that Miss Priscilla was a somewhat dangerous visitor in a junior's study. For the juniors were not the tidiest of mortals, and Miss Priscilla waged a deadly and unending war upon untidiness.

The old lady looked round the study as she entered, and uttered an exclamation:

"Goodness gracious!"

"What's the matter, dear?"

Tom Merry could not see anything to call forth that exclamation of Miss Fawcett's. The study looked all right to him.

It was true that the boys' maid who looked after the Shell passage had not emptied the ashpan under the grate for a couple of days. Boys' maids will do these things—or will not do them, to be more exact. The table was standing corner-wise instead of straight, as it had been pulled up towards the armchair, in which Manners had lately been sitting, looking to Lowther's camera, with which something had gone wrong.

Lowther had taken up photography, and Manners had sold him his camera some time back. But Manners still took a fatherly interest in that camera, and was always called upon to lend a hand if anything went "rocky." The camera lay on the table now, and there were various photographic paraphernalia lying near it.

The clock on the mantelpiece had stopped—not because it wasn't wound, but because it was wound too much.

The mantelpiece was dusty; but that wasn't the fault of the boys' maid. She had been threatened with sudden death if she dared to touch it. Manners had several films pinned up there, and if anything had happened to those films, the cause of the happenings would have heard emphatically from Manners.

The cupboard door was open, and it disclosed the provisions the Terrible Three kept in their study, mingled with other articles that had been crammed into the cupboard to get them out of the way.

Perhaps the butter-dish was not exactly the most suitable place for a ball of twine. Possibly a football and a loaf of bread were not in the best of company, especially when both were deposited in a box half full of firewood and shavings. It might have been that a jampot would have been better for having a lid on it, and that the coffee could have been kept in something better than an old mustard-tin, and the salt in a receptacle more imposing than a disused inkpot.

But these were trifles to the chums of the Shell.

They were not trifles to Miss Priscilla.

The good old lady shuddered as she looked round her.

"My darling Tommy!" she said faintly.

"Hallo!"

"My sweetest boy——"

"What's the row?"

"Is the study always in this state?"

"Oh, no; it's untidy sometimes!" said Tom Merry cheerfully. "I'm glad the maid has seen to it before your visit, dear."

Miss Priscilla shivered.

"Untidy sometimes, my dearest child."

"Oh, yes! The fellows will leave things about, you know. But it's all right now."

"All right!"

"A 1!"

"But—but—but——"

"We want some new curtains," said Tom Merry, glancing at the window, where the curtains certainly were hanging in tatters; "they're worn."

"Good gracious!"

"It wasn't only wear that did that," said Tom, "Herries said his bulldog could climb the curtains just as easily as Kerruish's monkey. I said he couldn't."

"Dear me!"

"We put it to the test, and—that's the result. Of course, I couldn't guess that the beast would lose his temper and begin to chew up the curtains. He nearly chewed up Herries, too."

"Oh, dear!"

"You can send me some new curtains from Laural Villa, if you like."

"I shall do so immediately, my dear child. But——"

"There's nothing else the matter."

"The study is very untidy."

"Oh, that's all right!"

"It is so dusty."

"Oh, it's not so dusty!" said Tom Merry, looking round; but the slangy significance of his reply was lost upon the lady from Huckleberry Heath.

"My darling Tommy——"

"Come and have a look at Study No. 6——"

"Is that also in a dreadful state?"

"Oh, worse than this!" said Tom Merry anxiously. He knew now that Miss Fawcett was going to begin to dust, and he preferred to have the tidying done in Blake's study if possible. "Better come to No. 6."

"Yes, but——"

"They've got a nice new duster there—one of those nice striped dusters as big as a towel, and it's never been used yet," said Tom Merry persuasively.

"But——"

"Just come and have a look——"

"Oh, very well!"

And Tom Merry, greatly elated at his success, piloted Miss Fawcett along the corridor, and down the Fourth-Form passage to No. 6.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was there alone.

The swell of St. Jim's had changed his collar after the collision with Skimpole, and he was giving the final touch to his necktie when Tom Merry kicked open the door.

D'Arcy looked round.

"Bai Jove! Is that you, Tom Mewwy?"

"I believe so—let's get at the glass, and I'll look and make sure."

"Oh, pway don't wot! Have you come to give me those details?"

"Not a bit of it."

"Then pway why——"

"I've come to bring you a visitor."

"A visitor?"

"Yes, Miss Fawcett."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy whirled away from the glass in an instant, and bowed low to the old lady framed in the doorway.

"This is extwemely kind of you, Miss Fawcett, to give me a look-in," he said.

"Indeed, I am glad to see you," said Miss Priscilla. "Tommy says that the study is in need of dusting——"

"Bai Jove!"

Tom Merry turned red.

"I—I didn't put it exactly like that," he stammered, "I—I said ours wasn't as dusty as No. 6."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"It is the same thing, my child. And, indeed, the study does need dusting."

Miss Fawcett looked round her.

The room was all right, as a matter of fact; but it seemed terribly dusty and disorderly to a precise lady from the country.

Arthur Augustus looked a litle dismayed.

"Weally, Miss Fawcett——" he began.

Miss Priscilla smiled her charming smile.

"I have told Dr. Holmes that I am determined to be useful while I am staying at the school," she remarked.

"Bai Jove!"

"I am going to do everything I can to assist the Housedame, and set an example to the maids."

"Weally!"

"I have dusted Dr. Holmes's study——"

"Great Scott!" murmured Tom Merry.

"He was so pleased. I think you have a new duster here, D'Arcy."

"Yaas, wathah."

"Will you lend it to me?"

"With pleasure, madam. You are goin' to dust Tom Mewwy's studay?"

"No; I think I will begin with this room."

"But——"

"I am afraid you boys are a little careless, and the maids do not look after you with the thoroughness that is to be desired."

"Yaas, but——"

"Hallo, are you going to be all day, Gussy?" said Jack Blake's cheery voice at the door. "I—— Hallo! How do you do, Miss Fawcett? Awfully kind of you to give us a look-in like this."

"Miss Fawcett is goin' to dust the studay," said D'Arcy dismally. "She is so awfully kind, you know."

"Oh!"

Jack Blake looked at his tools, and his half-made rabbit-hutch in a corner. If anybody in the School House had touched those tools, and nails, and screws, and bits of wood, there would have been happenings.

But with Miss Priscilla it was different.

Miss Priscilla had been so good and kind to the juniors on many occasions, and she was really such an estimable character, that Blake would have sacrificed his rabbit-hutch rather than have offended her.

Besides, he could not punch a lady's nose, even if she wanted to put his study tidy. Diplomacy was the thing.

Miss Priscilla had already taken the duster in hand, and there was no time to lose. It was a fine large duster, and very clean. It was Digby who had first kicked against the dust in the study, chiefly caused by Blake's carpentry. Digby had insisted upon contributions of twopence from each of the four in the study, and had brought a nice new duster at Mrs. Taggles's shop. The duster had hung on a nail on the door of the cupboard, ready for use ever since. There was not a stain on it.

"You dear children had better retire while I dust the study," said Miss Fawcett. "You may run away and play marbles."

The juniors exchanged glances.

The infants in the Second Form played marbles; but for the heroes of the Junior Football Eleven to be told to go and play marbles was an insult which—if it had come from a fellow at St. Jim's—could only have been wiped out in blood—from the nose, of course.

But the dear old soul from Huckleberry Heath was quite unconscious of giving offence.

Blake seemed to swallow something.

"Right-ho!" he said. "We—we'll go and play—er—marbles."

"Yaas, wathah."

"Come on, then," said Tom Merry. "Not much more time before dinner."

"Hold on a second! It's awfully kind of you to dust our study, Miss Fawcett——"

"My intention is to be kind, my dear boy. I love to make children happy."

Blake writhed.

"Ye-es, how—er—ripping of you, you know! But I don't want to be selfish. You really ought to dust Tom Merry's study, not ours. I can't deprive Tommy of your care in this way."

"My dear boy——"

"I'm not going to be selfish. Come on, and I'll show you the way to Tommy's study," said Blake, in the most generous way.

"Perhaps you are right——"

"Not at all," said Tom Merry hurriedly. "On the contrary——"

"Look here, Merry——"

"Shut up, Blake——"

"I'm not going to be selfish——"

"Yaas, wathah! I absolutely wefuse to be guilty of the howwid selfishness of havin' our studay dusted instead of Tom Mewwy's."

"Look here, Gussy——"

"I am quite wesolved, Tom Mewwy."

"I say!" exclaimed Tom Merry, struck with a sudden and brilliant idea. "There's a study at the end of the passage that's much dustier than either. Kangaroo's study, you know. The state that chap Glyn makes it in with his experiments is fearful, and Clifton Dane's pets make it—make it awfully dusty, too. As for Kangaroo, he likes the place to be tidy, and I saw him dusting the mantelpiece once, himself."

"Bai Jove!"

"This way, dear," said Tom, leading Miss Fawcett from the study, and talking so quickly that the good lady was quite unable to interrupt him. "You know, Kangaroo—his name's Harry Noble, you know, but we call him Kangaroo because he comes from Australia—he's a ripping chap, and a splendid cricketer, too, and we like him. As—as he's a son of the Empire, you know, and a giddy Imperialist, he ought to have his study dusted first. It's only fair to treat a Colonial with proper distinction. And he would be so jolly grateful, too."

"I don't think!" murmured Blake.

"Really, Tommy——"

"This way."

"But——"

"That's the study——"

"Tommy——"

"Here you are."

"But——"

Tom Merry threw open the door of the end study in the Shell passage.

"Come in, dear!"

And Miss Fawcett entered the study of the three Shell chums—Kangaroo, Glyn, and Dane, who were called the New Firm in the School House.

CHAPTER 11.

Cornstalk & Co. are Not Pleased.

THE end study was fortunately unoccupied. The New Firm were not likely to be indoors at that time of day. Glyn might have been there, at work with his experiments, but, as a matter of fact, he was not. Kangaroo had dragged him off for a football practice, one of the first of the season, and the study was empty.

Miss Fawcett gazed round the room with more horror than she had shown in either Tom Merry's study or Blake's.

The end study was the largest in the Shell passage, but there was none too much room for the New Firm and their belongings.

Bernard Glyn's apparatus took up a great deal of room, and filled a good many boxes and shelves, and the belongings of Kangaroo and Clifton Dane were not small.

The study certainly was a little untidy.

Miss Fawcett's eye gleamed as she looked round it, and her hands closed upon the duster with a businesslike grip.

"Awfully dusty, ain't it?" said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Kangaroo will be so pleased," murmured Tom Merry.

Miss Priscilla smiled beamingly.

"I shall be very glad to clear up the study and dust it, as a surprise for those dear boys," she said. "Don't tell them anything about it."

"Bai Jove! Wathah not!"

"I want it to come as a complete surprise to them."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"They will be delighted."

"What-ho!" said Tom Merry.

"You may run away now, and I will begin."

And the juniors ran away, and Miss Fawcett began.

As soon as they had turned the corner of the passage, the three juniors stopped, to lean up against the wall and yell.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My only hat!"

"Gweat Scott!"

"This will be the joke of the season upon the Cornstalk."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm sowwy for Glyn's appawatus."

"Ho, ho, ho!"

"Oh, that's all right! Come on—let's get to the footer and prove an alibi."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the juniors went down to football practice.

Cornstalk & Co. were kicking a footer about, and they greeted the juniors with a yell as the latter arrived on the footer ground.

"Now, then, you slackers! Play up!"

"Bai Jove! I decline to be chawactewised as a slackah."

"Play up, then!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

And the juniors helped Cornstalk & Co. to punt the ball about till the bell rang for midday dinner.

Tom Merry, Blake, and D'Arcy grinned to themselves and one another when they went into the School House.

By that time, they had no doubt, the dusting of the end study was over, and they wondered in what terrible state of complete tidiness Miss Priscilla had left it.

They were curious to see; but they did not care to go upon the spot till Kangaroo and his chums had made the discovery for themselves.

Noble, Glyn, and Dane had no suspicion. They ate their dinner, and left the hall afterwards, and then Kangaroo wanted to go down to the footer again.

Bernard Glyn shook his head.

"I'm going to shove in some work on my mechanical man before afternoon school," he said. "I'm going up to the study."

"Rats! Come to the footer."

"Oh, I can't race about just after dinner. You come up to the study and help me."

"Well, I don't mind if I do," grunted Kangaroo. "You coming, Dane?"

The Canadian nodded.

"I'll come!"

And the New Firm went upstairs together. Tom Merry grinned at Blake and Arthur Augustus.

"This is where we smile," he murmured.

"Kangy won't smile."

"Wathah not."

"Come on, kids; we must see this," said Tom Merry, following the New Firm up the stairs at a respectful distance.

"Yaas, wathah!"

They stalked Cornstalk & Co. along the Shell passage. They watched them enter the end study, and they listened for what would follow.

It was not long in following. There was a yell of wrath from the end study.

The juniors hurried along, and looked in at the door, with gleeful grins.

Kangaroo, Dane, and Glyn were standing in the study, looking around them with blank dismay and wrath.

Miss Fawcett had dusted and tidied up the study. She had done it—with a vengeance.

The room was undeniably tidy. Everything was in apple-pie order. The books were put away upon the shelves. The papers were tidied up in a heap on a shelf—papers upon which Kangaroo had been writing out a Latin imposition being mixed up with the sheets containing Clifton Dane's half-written contribution to "Tom Merry's Weekly," and the still more important sheets upon which the Liverpool lad had jotted down facts and figures for his experiments. The task of sorting them out was likely to be quite an exhilarating one.

But that was not all. Glyn's dynamo had been packed away in a corner, as an unsightly thing that was better out of view, and a few odd ends of wire showed that Miss Fawcett had not handled it with an experienced hand.

In another corner was a little stack of dry batteries, coils of wire, and other electrical necessaries, packed up most tidily. But the foundation of the stack was a cardboard box of sal ammoniac, and over it were stacked the cells of a wet battery Glyn had been using. One of the jars had

been cracked, and the water had run out, and was soaking into the sal ammoniac below.

The looking-glass had been carefully cleaned. On that glass Glyn was accustomed to make calculations with chalk, and all the figures relating to the construction of his mechanical man had been chalked there. But they were gone now.

Glyn stared at the glass, and round at the other tidinesses of which the study was full, and howled like a Red Indian.

"Who's done this?"

"What beast——"

"What idiot——"

"What dangerous maniac——"

"Has been here!" finished all three together.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry.

The New Firm turned to the door.

The three juniors there were roaring with laughter; they could not help it. Cornstalk & Co. jumped to a conclusion —natural enough, though erroneous.

"You rotters!" roared Kangaroo. "You've done this!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go for them!"

"Here, I say—hold on——"

"Bai Jove! You see——"

"Sock it to 'em!" roared Bernard Glyn.

And the New Firm did not hold on. They rushed at the three juniors, and in a moment the half dozen of them were rolling over in the passage, fighting like wildcats.

CHAPTER 12.

Only a Misunderstanding.

"GOODNESS gracious!"

Miss Fawcett uttered the exclamation in tones of horror.

It was very unfortunate that she should have come along at that moment. But Miss Fawcett was turning up in all sorts of places at all sorts of odd moments that day.

The good old lady looked down upon the half dozen juniors as they rolled on the linoleum, and she could hardly believe her eyes.

"Tommy, my darling!"

"Take that!"

"Rotter!"

"Ass!"

"I tell you——"

"Bai Jove!"

"I——"

"Tommy!" shrieked Miss Fawcett. "My sweet darling! My precious Tommy! Don't fight with that great rough boy, Tommy!"

"Hallo!" ejaculated Tom Merry, suddenly recognising Miss Fawcett's voice through the noise and the dust. "Hallo!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Tommy!"

"Phew!"

"Tommy!"

"Great Scott!"

The juniors jumped up. They had been very excited, and they had exchanged some hard knocks, and they looked very dusty and dishevelled. They looked very sheepish, too, as Miss Priscilla's horrified eyes were fixed upon them.

"My darling boy!"

"Oh!"

"You—you were fighting!"

Tom Merry turned scarlet.

"N-n-not exactly fighting, you know," he stammered.

"Oh, no," said Kangaroo; "n-not exactly fighting! It was just a—just a—a sort of a kind of a dust-up."

"My darling boy!"

"I'm not hurt. It's all right. It was only a misunderstanding."

"You are injured."

"My darling boy!"

"Not a bit."

"Your dear little nose is swollen."

"It's all right."

"You have a cut on your sweet little mouth."

"Oh, I—I—it's all right; indeed it is!"

"What were you fighting about?"

"A—a—a misunderstanding."

"Yaas, wathah, bai Jove!"

"They've been japing us," said Bernard Glyn. "But it's all right——"

"We didn't, you ass!"

"You didn't!"

"Wathah not!"

"You didn't muck up our study?"

"No, duffer!"

"Perhaps we were a little hasty," said Kangaroo. "But we saw you sniggering at the door, you see, and that was the how of it."

"Bai Jove! I——"

"You see——"

"I decline to have my laughtah chawactewised as sniggewin'. I——"

"Oh, cheese it, Gussy!"

"I wefuse to cheese it. I wegard——"

"But some idiot has been——" began Bernard Glyn.

"Shut up, Glyn!"

"Rats! Why should I shut up? I must explain to Miss Fawcett. You see, Miss Fawcett, we thought these young bounders had been mucking up our study for a jape—a joke, you know."

"Dear me!"

"Some idiot has been here, and——"

"Shut up!"

"Rats!"

"Some dangerous lunatic has been in the study," said Clifton Dane, taking up the tale. "Everything is simply mucked up."

"All our papers——"

"And books——"

"And tools——"

"All my calculations——"

"And my literary work——"

"Dear me! Has somebody been making the study untidy again, after I tidied it up?" said Miss Fawcett, much distressed.

Bernard Glyn jumped.

"You—er—you tidied it up, Miss Fawcett?"

"Certainly!"

"Oh!"

"I was very careful," said Miss Fawcett. "I put everything neat and tidy. I am so sorry if it has been disturbed since."

Kangaroo & Co. smiled a sickly smile.

"Oh! We—we didn't know that," stammered the Australian.

"We—we weren't aware of it," said Dane.

"So—so good of you," groaned Glyn.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Tommy dear thought that you would like your study to be dusted," said Miss Priscilla, with a beaming smile. "My dearest Tommy is so thoughtful for others."

The New Firm gave her dearest Tommy an expressive look; but what that look expressed was not gratitude.

"Now, you must not quarrel again," said Miss Fawcett. "You see that it is all due to a misunderstanding."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Shake hands and be friends. I do not know whether you are too old to kiss one another."

"My hat!"

The juniors, looking particularly idiotic, shook hands all round, and Miss Priscilla beamed upon them with gentle affection.

"Now I may safely leave you," she said. "I am sure you will not quarrel again."

"Honour bwight, deah boy—I mean, deah gal—that is to say, deah madam."

"It's pax," said Tom Merry.

"I have dusted some other studies, too, and I am going to make myself useful to Mrs. Mimms this afternoon," said Miss Fawcett. "Dr. Holmes does not expect a reply to his letter until to-morrow morning at the earliest, and I shall not leave till after he has received it. Ah, I forgot, you do not know about the matter. I hope to inaugurate quite a new era of tidiness in the School House while I am here."

And Miss Fawcett went her way.

The juniors looked at one another rather doubtfully.

"I suppose we were rather hasty," grinned Kangaroo, at last. "But it was you that set her to dusting the study, though, wasn't it?"

"Well, what were we to do?" demanded Tom Merry. "She was going to dust ours, and we shifted her off to your room. I suppose you wouldn't like us to refuse a kindness?"

"All my apparatus mucked up," grunted Glyn. "I——"

"Bai Jove! What's that wow?"

It was a roar from up the passage. Lowther and Manners were going into Tom Merry's study, and that roar had burst from the two simultaneously.

Kangaroo gave a yell.

"Ha, ha, ha! She's dusted your study, too!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Dane and Glyn.

"Bai Jove! I wegard that as wathah funnay! She has dusted Tom Mewwy's study aftan all! Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry gave a gasp, and rushed away up the passage. Had his diplomacy been exerted in vain, after all?

The other juniors followed him at a run, anxious to see

Taggles's shouts for help, rising crescendo, rang through the shadowy quadrangle. "'Elp! 'Elp!'

what havoc had been wrought in his quarters by the kindness of Miss Priscilla.

They reached the doorway, and looked in. Manners and Lowther were dancing with rage, and bore a striking resemblance to a couple of dancing dervishes.

The study had been dusted.

CHAPTER 13.

Not so Dusty.

THE wrath of the juniors was pardonable.

Miss Fawcett, after finishing the end study, had found sufficient time to attend to Tom Merry's quarters, and she had attended to them—thoroughly.

Everything was as clean as a new pin. The untidy films hanging to the wallpaper over the mantelpiece, round the little glass, had been taken away, and where they were, goodness only knew. No doubt Miss Fawcett had regarded the curly scrolls as so much useless lumber, and imagined that it had been pinned up there out of the way. She knew that boys had curious manners and customs, and perhaps thought that that was one of them. The camera had been taken off the table, and packed away tidily in the cupboard. Manners dragged it out.

Miss Fawcett's ideas on the subject of photography must have been absolutely elementary.

She apparently regarded a camera as a receptacle for packing things into. She had packed oddments of various kinds—odd rolls of films, backs of printing-frames, and so forth, into the camera, till all available space was filled. Other rolls of films she had undone, and rolled up into one big roll to take up less room, in blissful unconsciousness of the fact that they were ruined by exposure to the daylight. As the unfortunate photographers paid three shillings a roll, their feelings may be imagined.

There were other symptoms of the magic touch of a woman's hand in the room.

Everything the juniors used, whether for amusement, for work, or for their hobbies, was packed away neatly in some unseen and inaccessible place. The study had not, perhaps, been very tidy. But the boys had known where to find a thing when they wanted it. But that was over now.

When they went to look for a fountain pen, they would probably find a football inflator, and, looking for a back number of "The Magnet," might lead to the discovery of a classical atlas, and so on. The study was tidy.

Kangaroo & Co. roared, and Blake and D'Arcy joined

them. Tom Merry did not roar. He gazed blankly into the study.

Manners and Lowther glared at the group.

"Who's done this?" roared Manners

"What dummy has been here?' shrieked Lowther.

"Bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If this is a jape——"

"It isn't a jape," said Tom Merry, almost with tears in his eyes. "It's all right——"

"All right! Mad?"

"Duffer! Ass! All right! Why——"

"I mean——"

"What idiot was it? I suppose he was tired of life!" shouted Lowther. "Where is he? What's his name?"

"It was——"

"Quick!" yelled Lowther, picking up a cricket-stump "Who was it? What was the name of the burbling ass?"

"Miss Fawcett!"

"Wh-wh-wh-what!"

The cricket-stump went to the floor with a crash.

"Miss Fawcett!"

"Yes! She's dusted the study!"

"Yaas, wathah, bai Jove! A most estimable lady, and awfully tidy," said Arthur Augustus. "She's dusted Kangawoo's study, too, and Kangawoo is quite pleased."

"Of all the——"

"Oh, shut up!" said Tom Merry. "It can't be helped. These things will happen."

"That's so," said Blake philosophically. "Take it calmly."

"Calmly! Why——"

"Look at this camera——"

"Look here——"

"My only hat!" said Blake. "I'm jolly glad that Miss Fawcett didn't have time to dust No. 6, too!"

"Bai Jove, yaas!"

"How do you know she didn't?" grinned Kangaroo. "As she found time for this one, she may have found time for No. 6 as well."

"M-m-m-my hat!" gasped Blake, struck with horror at the thought.

He dashed away down the passage.

They all dashed after him, eager to see whether the general misfortune had gone further. Arthur Augustus gave a wail as he dashed into Study No. 6.

There is no need to dwell upon the harrowing details, to borrow an expression from the novelists. Suffice it to say that D'Arcy's silk hat was packed away on a dusty shelf which was just too high up for Miss Fawcett to reach to dust. It was standing there in a nice little pool of treacle which had been spilt there some time back. The neckties D'Arcy had left about the study were out of sight now; they subsequently turned up, on the following term, nicely folded in a cardboard box at the back of the cupboard. But it was Blake who had most cause to yell His half-made rabbit-hutch—alas!

He sat down on the table, and groaned.

Where his tools were he had no idea. Perhaps they would turn up again from the tidy places they had been packed into, and perhaps they wouldn't!

But his rabbit-hutch! All the pieces he had made with great care to put together had gone. Miss Fawcett had no doubt wondered why the juniors should keep fragments of wood in the study. As for the nails and screws, all placed just where Blake wanted them when he finished the hutch, of course they had vanished!

That was not all. But that was enough!

"I say, Tom Merry," murmured Blake softly.

"Yes?"

"Could you take your old governess out somewhere to-night, and lose her?"

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "It would be worth a fivah!"

But Tom Merry only chuckled and departed.

CHAPTER 14.

Skimpole is Just in Time.

THERE were thoughtful faces in the Shell and the Fourth Form that afternoon. By that statement, we do not mean to imply that the juniors were paying unusual attention to their lessons.

They were thinking of Miss Fawcett.

The tidying of the three studies had been told all over the school is an excellent joke, and it had seemed excruciatingly funny to all but the owners of the studies. But it had occurred to some of the juniors that, during afternoon school, Miss Fawcett might carry her tidying proclivities further. The whole Shell passage might be tidy by the time they were released from classes, and the possibility was enough to make the juniors look grave.

Skimpole leaned towards Tom Merry, and whispered to him in class.

"Merry——"

"Don't jaw!" muttered Tom.

"But this is important——"

"Oh, chuck it! I haven't any details to give you!"

"I was not thinking of details," said Skimpole, blinking at him. "As for the mystery of Miss Fawcett, I have come to the conclusion that the case could be better worked out at Huckleberry Heath than here at the school."

"Dry up!"

"I am going to ask the Head's permission to go to Huckleberry Heath and take up the case."

"You frabjous ass!"

"Really, Merry——"

"Linton will look round in a tick!"

"I cannot see him looking. You see——"

"Yes, I see, but you don't. Shut up."

"But it's important. I was thinking of my study."

"Blow your study!"

"Is there any danger that Miss Fawcett may go to it and dust it?" asked Skimpole anxiously.

Tom Merry chuckled.

"I shouldn't wonder!"

"But—but you know, my manuscript is there!" said Skimpole, in great distress. "All the notes for my book of Socialism, of which I have completed only three hundred and fifty-four chapters out of the nine hundred and eighty, and——"

"Let's hope there will be a clean sweep!"

"Really, Merry! Besides, there is the rough draft of my pamphlet on Determinism, in which I prove clearly that man is the outcome of his heredity and environment, and that everything which is, is, exactly as it is, and in no other way—one of the greatest truths discovered in modern times."

"Go hon!"

"If Miss Fawcett should happen to destroy those papers——"

"Quite likely."

"Really——"

"But if she does it really won't matter—you can't blame her, Skimmy. It will be due to her heredity and her environment."

Skimpole rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"Yes, but——"

"What's the good of bothering? You can't resist the combined influence of heredity and environment!"

"No, but——"

"You are talking, Skimpole!" suddenly broke in the voice of Mr. Linton.

"Ye-e-es, sir——"

"Take fifty lines!"

"Yo-e-es, sir, but——"

"Take a hundred lines!"

"Yes, sir, but——"

"Skimpole——"

"If you please, sir——"

"What is the matter with you, Skimpole?"

"If you please, sir, I'm afraid——"

"Afraid!" ejaculated Mr. Linton, in astonishment.

"Yes, sir. I am afraid somebody is dusting my study, sir!"

"Oh!"

"I have a great number of valuable papers lying about there, sir. Would you mind if I left the class-room for a few minutes to lock my study door?"

Mr. Linton thought of Miss Priscilla and suppressed a smile.

"You may go, Skimpole."

"Thank you, sir!" And Skimpole went.

He hurried up to the Shell passage, and sure enough the door of his study was open, and the sound of movements came from within.

Skimpole hurried to the open door in dismay. Miss Fawcett was there. She had a duster in her hand, and was dusting—her favourite occupation. Skimpole blinked into the study.

"Goodness gracious!" said Miss Fawcett aloud. "What a great mass of papers! Waste paper, I suppose, bought to light the fire with—a boy could never have written so much! Yes, and it is not sensible writing upon it—heredity, environment, Determinism—some nonsense! I suppose it had better be burned!"

Skimpole gave a gasp.

"Really, Miss Fawcett——"

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The good old lady looked round.

"Ah, it is you, Skimpole!"

"Yes, ma'am; this is my study."

"It is the untidiest study in the passage," said Miss Fawcett. "I was going to dust it for you. I have dusted some of the studies, and the dear boys were so pleased!"

"H'm!"

"I am going to dust this——"

"If you please——"

"I shall soon make a change here——"

"Madam——"

"You will not know the study again."

"But——"

"It will not take me long to make a complete clearance."

"You—you must not disturb my papers!" gasped Skimpole. "I cannot have them mixed, or I may forget which pages refer to Determinism, and which to Socialism, and which to Comptism. I have also some papers on the Darwinian theory. They are all much alike, you know, and would take a great deal of time to sort out."

"Did you write all this nonsense, my dear boy?"

"It is not nonsense," explained Skimpole. "That is Determinism."

"What is the difference?"

Skimpole scratched his head.

"Well, I could hardly explain the difference off-hand, but——"

"Are the papers any good?"

"Great Scott! I should say so! They are worth thousands of pounds!"

"Dear me!"

"Pray do not touch them! Instead of you dusting the study, ma'am, I will explain to you some of the matters dealt with in these papers. Take the subject of Determinism. I will deal with it exhaustively from the very beginning."

"Goodness gracious!"

"Take man—man in his natural state——"

"My goodness!"

"Consider him—mere man, without any of the adjuncts of civilisation—wild, untamed, uncivilised, unclothed——"

"Bless my soul!"

"Consider him—are you going, Miss Fawcett?"

"I—I think I will go to the House-dame's room now."

"But——"

"I—I—I——"

Skimpole blinked after Miss Fawcett as she disappeared. The good lady was beginning to think that the genius of the Shell was a little wrong in his head.

"I really do not understand," murmured Skimpole. "It was very unpleasant to find her here, but we were really getting along nicely, after all, when she suddenly departed. I really do not understand. However, I will take the opportunity of locking the door on the outside."

And Skimpole did so, and went back to the class-room with the key in his pocket, feeling that his valuable papers were quite safe now, and that his three hundred and fifty-four chapters ran no risk of sharing the fate of the less important Alexandrian library.

CHAPTER 15.

Rebellion!

DR. HOLMES wore a worried look. He had taken the Sixth for the second lesson that afternoon, and had returned to the study with a weight on his mind.

He had half-feared to find Miss Priscilla there, but he found the room empty, and was relieved.

But his relief was short-lived.

If Miss Fawcett was not there, she was somewhere else—and wherever she was there was pretty certain to be trouble.

Estimable old lady she certainly was, but her determination to make herself useful was turning the whole place to sixes and sevens.

She had commenced by dusting the Head's study. Her further little kindnesses among the Shell and the Fourth Form we have described. Since then she had put Kildare's study to rights. Kildare, the captain of the school, had taken it quietly. Kildare was an Irishman, and willing to take anything from the gentle sex.

But that was not all.

She had looked in at Mr. Railton's room, and put his papers in order for him. Then, like Alexander, seeking fresh worlds to conquer, she came over to the Head's house.

At St. Jim's the two Houses—School House and New House—were each governed by a House-master, the housekeeping being in the hands of a "dame," as they called the housekeeper.

The Head's house, however, was independent of either, and there Mrs. Holmes reigned supreme.

Miss Fawcett would gladly have given Mrs. Holmes the benefit of her advice and assistance, but the Head's wife gently but firmly declined.

Whatever Miss Fawcett might do in the two Houses, in the Head's own house she was a guest—merely that, and nothing more.

Disappointed of this outlet for her usefulness, Miss Fawcett turned her whole attention to the School House. The New House would come later, if she stayed long enough at St. Jim's. The School House naturally came first, as it was in the School House that her dear Tommy resided.

And Miss Fawcett made herself very useful.

She visited the kitchen, and exasperated the cook—she visited the House-dame, and exasperated her. She discovered traces of dust on all the wainscots, and exasperated all the maids.

She made suggestions for a better airing of the beds in the dormitory—she offered valuable recipes for the cooking. She suggested earlier rising and harder work for the maids as the only possible way of coping with the dust, and was greatly surprised that the proposal was not received with enthusiasm.

As a matter of fact, Mrs. Mimms and her staff kept the School House in very good order, but to the precise old lady from Huckleberry Heath the slightest departure from exactitude was an eye-sorrow.

Miss Priscilla found many things capable of improvement, and in the fulness of her heart she explained them to everybody.

After all, why should not people be willing to improve themselves and their surroundings, especially with a kind friend at hand to cheerfully point out all the shortcomings?

Miss Fawcett did her duty. She was kind and useful, and before tea-time the whole School House was in a state of revolt.

Murmurs of revolt had reached the Head's ears, and as he sat in his study now, he wondered uneasily what was transpiring.

He had sent off the letter to Scotland Yard at the earliest possible moment, and had expressed it in order to save time.

How long he would be in receiving an answer he did not know; but he had urged the detective authorities to let him have one at the earliest possible hour, though he had not explained the exact cause of the haste.

If Miss Priscilla received the assurance of the Criminal Investigation Department experts that the letter had never borne any writing at all, she would doubtless be convinced that the whole thing was a delusion, and would leave St. Jim's.

Dr. Holmes would never have been discourteous or inhospitable, especially to such an estimable character as Miss Priscilla. But he was fervently longing to say good-bye to her.

He was thinking over the matter, when there came a tap at the door.

"Come in," said the Head wearily.

Mrs. Mimms came in.

The fat, and usually good-natured face of the School House "dame" was dark and lowering, and there was a curious light in her eyes. She was evidently labouring under great and suppressed excitement.

Dr. Holmes looked at her.

"Mrs. Mimms."

"Yes, Dr. Holmes!" jerked out the good lady—"yes!"

"What——"

"I've been House-dame of the School House for ten years, sir."

"Dear me! So long?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I dare say you are right, Mrs. Mimms," said Dr. Holmes, wondering what on earth the good lady was mentioning that circumstance for.

"I hope, sir, I have always given satisfaction?"

"Certainly, Mrs. Mimms!"

"There was a little difficulty, I know, sir, at the time when Mr. Kidd left, and Mr. Railton first became House-master, but that was some time back."

"Certainly!"

"Since then, I think the boys have been satisfied?"

"I am sure of it!"

"And you have always seemed satisfied, sir?"

"Indeed, I have been satisfied, Mrs. Mimms. I——"

"And Mrs. Holmes, sir, has always been satisfied?"

"Quite so. But——"

"And at a meeting of the governors, sir," went on Mrs. Mimms, with rising excitement—"at the annual meeting of the governors, sir, Lord Eastwood himself was pleased to mention me, sir, by name, as a competent and painstaking House-dame."

"Quite true, Mrs. Mimms," said the perplexed Head. "You are really a most valuable person, Mrs. Mimms."

"Then, sir, I'm sorry to be giving you notice, sir."

The Head jumped.

"What?"

"I am sending in my resignation, sir."

"Dear me."

"And I should take it as a favour, sir, if you would replace me at the earliest possible moment, sir, so that I can leave the school."

"Bless my soul!"

"There is a lady now present in the House who might be quite willing to take my place till you are suited, however."

"Oh!"

"And that is all, Dr. Holmes. I am sorry to part with a kind and good gentleman like yourself, sir, and Mrs. Holmes has always been most kind. But to be told that the wainscot was dusty! It's more than flesh and blood could stand, sir!"

"Oh dear!"

Mrs. Mimms, evidently on the verge of hysterics, turned blindly towards the door. Dr. Holmes rose from his chair.

"My dear Mrs. Mimms, pray do not go—pray sit down! I am greatly distressed. What is the trouble?"

"If I was standing before the whole board of governors, sir, at this identical moment, I'd say, with my last breath, that it was not dusty, Dr. Holmes."

"But——"

"In a big House like the School House, and with so many boys, of course there will be dust."

"Why, of course there will, Mrs. Mimms," said the Head soothingly.

"It was caused by Master Reilly bringing his bicycle into the House to mend a puncture, sir, so I believe."

"Dear me!"

"A mere speck, sir."

"Quite so. I——"

"And, in any case, sir, am I to be dictated to in my own House?"

"Certainly not!"

"I mean in the House under my charge. Am I?"

"Oh, no!"

"I know Miss Fawcett means well."

The Head drew a deep breath.

"Oh, Miss Fawcett!"

"Yes, sir. But I cannot——"

"My dear Mrs. Mimms——"

"Flesh and blood will not stand it. Not well aired, indeed! As if I should let the boys go into beds that were not well aired!"

"Certainly not!"

"I am sorry to leave the school, sir," said Mrs. Mimms, shedding tears. "I am very fond of the place, and very fond of the dear boys. I think they like me, sir."

"I am certain they do, Mrs. Mimms!"

"But flesh and blood cannot stand it, sir. Well aired, indeed!"

"My dear lady, you—you must not take it so much to heart. Miss Fawcett probably did not mean exactly that the wainscots were not well aired——"

"The beds, sir."

"I—I mean the beds. That the beds were dusty. You see——"

"Flesh and blood cannot——"

"You see, she has a kind heart——"

"Flesh and blood——"

"She only wishes to be useful."

"Flesh——"

"Will you not try and be patient for a few days, Mrs. Mimms, for—for my sake?" said the Head. "Miss Fawcett is a most kind lady, and my good friend. You see that I am in a—a somewhat difficult position."

The House-dame softened.

"Well, sir, if you have every confidence in me——"

"Every confidence, Mrs. Mimms, I assure you. I should be most sorry to part with you—very sorry indeed!"

"You do not think that I allow the maids to leave the wainscots dusty?"

"Decidedly not!"

"You have no doubts about the beds being well aired, sir?"

"Not in the least."

"Well," said Mrs. Mimms, relenting—"well——"

"Pray be patient for a day or two, Mrs. Mimms. Miss Fawcett only wishes to be kind."

Mrs. Mimms sniffed.

"I will try, sir."

"Thank you! You are a good soul, Mrs. Mimms."

And the House-dame left the study. Dr. Holmes fanned himself with a sheet of foolscap.

"Dear me!" he murmured.

CHAPTER 16.

Pleasant for the Head

THE doctor's brow was damp with perspiration. He had come successfully through the interview with Mrs. Mimms; but he had a feeling that this would not be the end.

And he was right!

Ten minutes later there was another tap at his door, and the door opened, and a very plump and red face appeared in view.

Dr. Holmes gazed helplessly at the School House cook.

"If you please, Dr. Holmes——"

"Ye-e-es?"

"I wish to speak one word to you, sir——"

"Oh, go on, please! My goodness!"

"How long will it be, sir, before you could replace me?" asked the cook, in a trembling voice.

"Er—replace you?"

"Yes, sir."

"But—but I have no wish to—er—replace you."

"You must please take notice from me, sir."

"But——"

"Any cook," said the good lady, her voice still shaking—"any cook would have said that the apple dumplings were done to a turn."

"The—the apple dumplings?"

"They would not have caused indigestion to the most delicate——"

"Ahem!"

"To the most delicate stomach, sir. Which I've cooked apple dumplings for forty years, sir, and never had a complaint."

"My dear, good soul——"

"I should like to leave at once, sir, if convenient to you."

"But—but why?"

"Perhaps Miss Fawcett will take my place, sir, and cook better apple dumplings."

"Bless my soul!"

"That is all, sir."

"But—but stay a moment——"

"Not if I am to be talked to in my own kitchen, sir. Why, Mrs. Mimms never talks to me in my own kitchen as I have been talked to this day!"

"But——"

"Perhaps Miss Fawcett knows a better cook, sir. In that case, she will be able to recommend her, and you will be satisfied."

"But—but I am satisfied now, m-m-more than satisfied!"

"They were done to a turn, sir."

"I am sure they were."

"Never had I turned out nicer apple dumplings, sir, since I've been cook in the School House, and that's seven years come Christmas."

"But——"

"So I shall be glad, sir, if you will replace me as soon as possible," said the cook firmly.

The doctor wiped his forehead.

"My dear—er—Mrs. Towle, I—I assure you—I firmly believe that the apple-dumplings were well aired—I—I mean, that they were not dusty. I hope you will not be hasty. Pray think about it."

"Seven years come Christmas I've been cook in this 'ouse, sir, and I've never been talked to so before."

"Bless my soul."

Dr. Holmes sank into his chair again in dismay. The cook, who was almost in hysterics, hurried from the study. Dr. Holmes gasped.

He was still gasping when there was another knock at the door, and a red-faced housemaid came in.

"If you please, sir——"

"Oh dear!"

"I wish to go, sir—this very day, sir!"

"Oh!"

"My box can be sent on afterwards, sir."

"Oh!"

"I've been in this house two years, sir, and Mrs. Holmes has always been satisfied with me, and now a person——"

"Oh!"

"Which I will not call her a lady, sir——"

"Come, come!"

"So I must go, sir; and I'm sorry to leave a good place, and sorry to leave Mrs. Holmes, which has always been kind to me; and I polished the silver as bright as it would come, and the person should try to polish silver herself, sir; and as I said, I won't call her a lady, sir, so my box can be sent after me," said the maid, somewhat incoherently.

"You must settle this with Mrs. Mimms," said the Head. "Surely she is the proper person to speak to."

"Which she's going herself, sir, and——"

"Upon my word!"

"And they're all going."

"Pway let us have the details, then, Tom Mewwy," said D'Arcy. "Rats!" Skimpole began to write "Ra ——," and then checked himself.

"What!"

"Mary and Alice and Jane are coming to give you notice, sir."

"What, what!"

"And so is the gardener——"

"The gardener!"

"And the coachman."

"Upon my word!"

"They're all coming, sir. And it's that person, which I won't call her a lady."

And the maid fled.

Dr. Holmes stared after her for a moment or two, and then hastily left the study. He had no desire to run the gauntlet of a whole household giving notice in turn. He went quickly down the wide corridor that led to his private house, and as he departed he heard a sound of many footsteps in the passage where his study was. He had escaped only in time.

CHAPTER 17.

The Expedition.

TOM MERRY went to bed that night in a somewhat worried mood. He knew the havoc which Miss Priscilla was causing in the School House, and he knew that it would grow as long as she remained.

He had asked her for an explanation of her mysterious visit to the school, but it had not been accorded him.

Miss Fawcett did not want to trouble her ward with her peril, real or supposed. She told him that he should know everything later, and with that Tom Merry had to be content.

He knew that the Head was expecting a letter, which would perhaps determine the length of Miss Fawcett's stay; but that was all he knew about the matter. And he was in an anxious state of mind.

The day had been full of troubles of various sorts; but what was the morrow to be like?

On the morrow Miss Priscilla would be fairly upon the war-path, so to speak, and what had happened so far would be nothing to what would happen then.

And Tom Merry, fond as he was of his kind old governess, sincerely wished that she had remained at Laurel Villa, Huckleberry Heath. He looked forward to a continuation of her visit with great uneasiness.

He was fully prepared for more news in the morning; and he received it, too, when the Shell went down to breakfast.

Two of the maids had left, and the others were going that day. The gardener had given notice, and Taggles was also to depart the next day.

Most of the fellows took it as a joke. But Tom Merry could not help being serious about it. If Miss Fawcett went on making herself useful at this rate, the School House would soon be uninhabited, or else the boys would have to cook their own meals and make their own beds.

Miss Priscilla was always down early, and she looked round the grounds at St. Jim's before breakfast, and exasperated two under-gardeners into resolving to give notice that day.

Then she came in to breakfast in the Head's house.

She found Dr. Holmes with a letter in his hand.

The Head was staring blankly at the letter, an expression of the greatest astonishment upon his face.

Miss Fawcett looked at him quickly.

"Upon my word!" said the Head.

"Is it a reply from Scotland Yard, Dr. Holmes?"

"Yes, Miss Fawcett."

"What do they say?"

"That there is really writing on the letter you gave me—invisible writing, which had faded out, but left traces which their expert declares to be unmistakable."

"Yes; I told you there was writing on it," said Miss Fawcett wonderingly.

The Head coughed. It came as a great surprise to him to learn that the whole matter was not a delusion on the part of Miss Priscilla; but he could hardly explain as much to the old lady from Huckleberry Heath.

"They offer to send a competent officer down to Laurel Villa to investigate the matter," said Dr. Holmes. "You cannot do better than accept the offer, Miss Fawcett."

"I suppose so. In that case I had better return home, to be there as soon as the officer arrives."

"Exactly."

"I shall be sorry to cut my visit short——"

"Not at all. I—I mean, you must consult your interests—your safety. I will wire to the Detective Department to send the officer."

"Thank you so much, Dr. Holmes. You are very good."

"Not in the least."

"I should have been glad to stay a few more days, in order to make myself useful to you."

"I—I could not think of imposing upon your kindness in that way," said the Head hurriedly.

"You are too good."

"Not at all. I will send Binks with the wire at once. You might like to send a wire to Laurel Villa announcing your return this—this morning."

"Oh, thank you so much! You are so thoughtful. But there is another matter, sir. I should not feel quite safe without my darling boy."

"Er—Merry?"

"Yes. You will give him leave to come with me?"

The Head would have given the whole of the Shell leave to go with Miss Fawcett, if that would have induced her to depart by the next train.

"Certainly, my dear madam."

"Yet, will my dearest Tommy be safe there?"

"I—I should think so, with a detective officer present."

"Yes; but perhaps you would give leave to a few of his friends to come with him," suggested Miss Priscilla.

"Oh, certainly."

"You are very kind."

"Oh, no. I will speak to Merry——"

"Perhaps you will allow me to take the news to him. The dear boy will be so delighted to spend a few days with me."

The Head nodded acquiescence. He had no doubt that Tom Merry would be delighted to spend a few days away from lessons, anyway.

And immediately after breakfast Miss Fawcett broke the news to Tom Merry.

"My dearest Tommy," she said, taking him by the hand in the passage, "I have news for you."

"Yes, dear?"

"Would you like to come home for a few days?"

"Ye-es."

"And bring some of your friends?"

Tom Merry's eyes danced.

"Yes, awfully."

"I have been threatened by a dreadful man, Tommy."

"The rotter!"

"There is a detective coming to Laurel Villa——"

"My hat!"

"But I should feel safer with you there too, Tommy darling."

"Of course you would, dear."

"And the Head has given you permission to bring a few of your friends."

"Hurray!"

And Tom Merry rushed off to tell his friends the news.

And when the news spread, it was surprising to see the number of friends Tom Merry had. Fellows he hardly knew by sight assumed the chummiest airs towards him, and everybody who could boast of the least acquaintance made the very most of it.

If Tom Merry had taken all the hints given him, he would have made up a party consisting of the whole of the Shell, half the Fourth Form, and a good proportion of the Fifth.

But as that was not possible, he had to be a little careful in his selection. The Head had not fixed the number of the party, but it was necessary to keep within bounds.

Monty Lowther and Manners, of course, were coming. The chums of Study No. 6 had to come. That made seven. Skimpole explained that his services as an amateur detective would be wanted, and Tom had not the heart to say him nay.

Then there was Harry Noble, the Australian. He explained that he could not be left out, after the way his study had been mucked up, and Tom had to admit it.

Then Figgins & Co., of the New House, hearing what was in the wind, came over. But Mr. Railton gave a hint that Tom's selection must be confined to boys of his own house; so Figgins & Co. could do nothing but see the party off.

And that morning they started with Miss Fawcett.

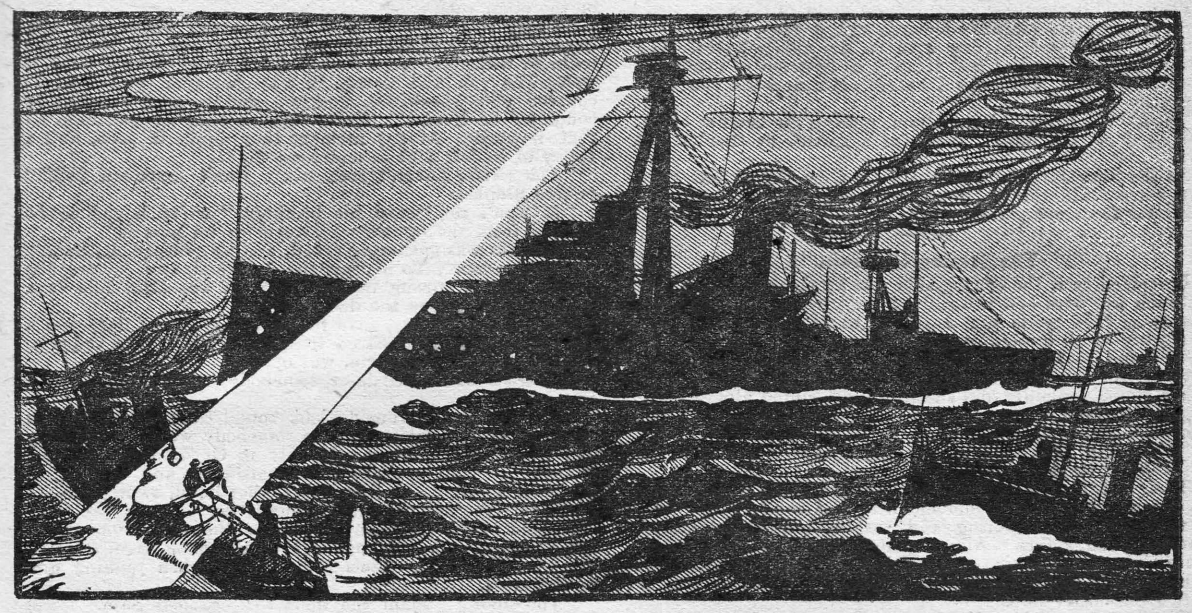
Kind and good as that dear old lady was, Dr. Holmes and his wife bade good-bye to her with a great deal of pleasure.

A brake bore the party to the station, and as the train rolled out Figgins & Co. stood on the platform, waving their caps to Tom Merry & Co., as they started on their adventurous expedition to track down the dreadful man.

THE END.

Please tell your Friends about this Story.

BRITAIN AT BAY.



A Powerful and Stirring War Story.

THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

Sam and Stephen Villiers, two cadets of Greyfriars School, by a combination of luck and pluck render valuable service to the British Army during the great German invasion. They are appointed special scouts to the Army, which is forced back on London by Von Krantz, the German commander. At the time when this instalment opens, Sam and Stephen are in Maldon with their friend Lieutenant Cavendish, R.N. The town has just been cleared of Germans by the League of Britons. The two boys announce their intention of making for London by land. ***(Now go on with the story.)***

Surprised.

"I'm more sorry to lose you than I've ever been to part from any chaps," said Cavendish; "but dooty's dooty, as my bo'sun says."

"So are we," said Sam. "You're the biggest brick in the Eastern Hemisphere, Bob! We shall never forget this last cruise. Put it there, old son!"

"I wish you the biggest sort of luck," said Cavendish, as the brothers bade him a heartfelt farewell, "and I'd like to be coming with you, only I'm a bit of a crab on the land. Salt water's what a man's meant to get about on. If a bullet don't find any of us, I'll bet we meet again after the top hole's reached. Good-bye, young 'uns, till the last big jubilee!"

The night was growing over the land as the brothers quietly slipped away out of Maldon. They were rather heavy-hearted at parting with Cavendish, and seldom had any three chums more regard for each other. They had passed through the ordeal of fire together, and stood the test well. Neither of the brothers spoke for some time.

But their spirits rose at the prospect of the work in front of them. Here in the Essex uplands they were thoroughly at home. Greyfriars, or, rather, its ruins, was not many miles away, and they knew every inch of the country. They struck out across the fields towards Danbury, taking every precaution.

It was not very long before they came across a German picket, and found that quite a body of troops were guarding a base of stores and supplies. Their front and outposts covered a long line, and to go round would have taken a long time. The boys decided to creep through in the darkness.

They were surprised to find it much more difficult than they expected, and they were nearly caught. Whether it was the capture of Maldon that had put the Germans on their guard, or whether they were watching the country more carefully, it was hard to say. But the boys had a narrow escape, and pushed on in silence after a long crawl through a dry ditch.

"They were keepin' that patrol uncommon well," murmured Stephen. "Did you see the sentry cock his ear an' stop?"

The boys covered another mile, moving cautiously, and soon found themselves confronted with another outpost, with a line of sentries that baffled them altogether. The ground was open, and after a close shave of being seen, even Sam's scouting skill was baffled, and he had to seek another way. But not far to the right was yet another picket.

"We always used to go past these beggars as if they were dummies!" muttered Stephen impatiently, as they retreated again.

"I tell you what it is, this campaign's sharpened 'em up an' taught 'em their business till there's no getting past 'em. Their commandin' officers took to havin' 'em tried an' shot for lettin' scouts get through. Now they're nearly as cute at the game as Red Indians."

"How is it there are so many troops here? I thought they were all besiegin' London."

"Rot! They hold half the country, an' their chief base is near here—at Woodham."

"We shall be a holy old time gettin' to London if we have to crawl the whole way on our stomachs."

"I'm afraid I've struck the wrong line. We must get inland more, towards Witham, an' then go south. It's too near their base here."

The boys made a long detour, and managed to get round the pickets, but they had to go nearly a mile back to do it. Then they shaped a course right across country towards the main railway line, and certainly found the fields and roads much clearer of Germans. When nearing the lines, however, they found more pickets, and details of Germans, and had to turn several times.

"We shall never get through," said Stephen impatiently. "Better get back to Maldon and go by water."

"Water be hanged! I've had enough of that, an' I'm not goin' to be beat as a scout!" said Sam. "That's Hatfield

Peverel ahead of us, an' if we can once get across the line, we'll have a clear passage. I've a notion we might pinch a couple of horses from the——"

He broke off and crouched. The sight of a passing patrol kept the boys in cover for over a minute. Then Sam went ahead, rapidly and quietly, Stephen following not far behind.

Suddenly a big, helmeted figure seemed to loom up from nowhere, between the boys, gave a guttural cry, and threw his rifle to his shoulder as he caught sight of Sam.

Stephen hurled himself forward, with a gasp, striking the rifle up, and thrust his leg between the man's knees. The heavy German lurched and tripped as he tried to grasp his young assailant, there was a hoarse oath, and the rifle spat viciously into the air.

"Come on, quick!" hissed Sam, pulling his brother clear. "Well done, old boy! Now for a sprint, or they've got us!"

As the boys darted ahead the shots from the pickets gave the alarm, and the Germans began to close in upon the fugitives from every side.

The Armoured Train.

It seemed as if the countryside was awakened. The fields between the boys and the railway were full of Germans, if the noise they made was anything to go by, running and searching in all directions.

Sam and Stephen ran like hares, keeping close together, for had they separated they would never have found each other again. Silently and swiftly they sprinted along, bending low as they went, and darting aside whenever they saw the loom of any German ahead.

"Confound it, we're right among a section guardin' the railway!" muttered Sam.

Their capture seemed a certainty, for there was danger at every step. For the moment they had evaded their pursuers, who were shouting and rushing about a hundred yards to the right. Almost immediately, however, they were discovered again, as two big German infantrymen caught sight of the fugitives, and made for them with a yell, from either side.

The boys were as active as terriers, even in the dark, and the Germans were clumsy enough at any time. Sam and his brother turned sharply to the right, and dashed ahead faster than ever, with the result that the two Germans missed them, and ran right into each other. They collided with such a shock that both rolled over on the ground amid a rattle of accoutrements and a burst of bad language, and long before they had picked themselves up, their quarry was out of sight among the bushes.

"Can't we lie up an' hide?" panted Stephen.

"No earthly use—they'll search every bit of cover that could hide a dog. There's the line in front—if we can get across we ought to give 'em the slip."

A signal-post a hundred yards ahead showed where the main Great Eastern line ran—now, of course, in the hands of the Germans. Stephen thought it likely they would find it too well guarded just there to get across—and so they would have done a little earlier, but the guard was scattered in all directions, looking for the boys.

Sam halted under the low hedge and fence next the line, and took a rapid survey as well as the darkness would let him.

Two hundred yards to the left was the little station of Hatfield Peverel, and a train—a very long one—could be seen standing at the up-platform. It had no tail-light, and was doubtless about to convey German stores to London from the base.

There was nobody in sight close at hand, and the boys seized the opportunity. They vaulted over the fence and darted across the metals, gaining the other side without raising any alarm. Once there, they paused a moment or two, still hearing the noise of the searchers left behind, and then struck away westwards to leave the railway as far as possible.

"I think we've done 'em," said Sam, and the brothers were congratulating themselves on a narrow escape, when suddenly danger sprang up right ahead. The spiked helmets of three German soldiers appeared, and instantly the men gave chase with a shout, one of them firing his rifle.

The boys took to their heels again, almost in despair. The whole place seemed to them to be over-run with Germans, and these new-comers had evidently been warned by the shots across the line. Sam, leading the way, bolted right along parallel with the line, towards the station, for it was the only direction in which they could go. By doubling round some old poultry-sheds they threw the pursuers off for a few moments, and lost sight of them.

The fugitives were now nearly up to the station, and a short, sharp whistle from the locomotive told that the train was just on the point of starting. Without a moment's thought Sam leaped the fence, and, running across the line, jumped up at the foot-board, and clung to the rail of the rearmost van, just as the train began to move. Stephen was beside him a moment later.

Scarcely daring to hope they would escape notice, the boys flattened themselves against the side of the van, holding tight to the brass rail, and trusted to the darkness. Their pursuers had not seen them dart across, and were hunting about and shouting to each other round the sheds on the other side.

So long was the train that the rear van was a long way beyond the end of the platform. It was the outside of the train to which the boys clung, and a queer-looking train it was. The van and several of the carriages seemed to be covered with sheet-iron, and the middle part was chiefly composed of trucks. There was no time to speculate on that, however. At any moment they might be seen, and a volley of bullets sent to end their flight.

"The swabs haven't seen us! Don't move an inch!" panted Stephen.

"It won't do," said his brother; "we're bound to be spotted from the opposite platform as we pass it."

The train was gathering speed, and he grasped the handle of the van door. To his surprise it turned, and, jerking the door open, he sprang inside. Stephen was after him in a moment, and pulled the door to.

The van was empty, save for some bundles of flags and a big pile of what appeared to be clothing. The opposite door, next to the platform, was open.

"There'll be a guard, or somebody! Look out!" said Sam quickly.

They had hardly time to look round them when the van came up to the platform, then somebody was heard calling out, and there was a gruff reply in German. The next moment a hand grasped the guard-rail, and a man in uniform, with a green flag in his other hand, swung himself easily into the van, as guards usually do.

He had barely got both feet inside when the young scouts leaped upon him and bore him to the floor, Sam flinging one arm round the man's face, and Stephen pinning him by the arms.

"The door! Slam the door to!" gasped Sam. And Stephen did so in less than two seconds. An oath and a shout broke from the astonished and struggling prisoner; but Sam rammed his face into the pile of clothing, while the roar of the train as it sped along faster muffled all other sounds. Stephen was helping his brother again in a moment, and they attended strictly to their captive for some time.

He was a powerful man, and gave them some trouble, but so completely had he been taken by surprise that he had no chance to draw a weapon. Stephen sat on his shoulder-blades while Sam strapped his wrists behind his back with the man's belt, and then, as the captive tried to bellow, and raise an alarm, Stephen gagged him effectually with the green railway-flag. Then they turned him over and had a look at him. He was a German transport service man, in the regular uniform, but with the cap which the military railwaymen wear, instead of a helmet.

"There you are, Hans, my boy!" said Stephen, pulling him on to the pile of clothing. "You won't come to any harm if you keep quiet. We've reserved this compartment for ourselves, an' we don't want intruders!"

"No need to gag him now, I think," said Sam; "we owe him a free passage. The train makes too much row for any outsiders to hear him. Do you hear, Hans? You'll be more comfortable if you don't try to yell, for I'll bet there's arsenic in that green-dyed flag."

The Hand of the League.

The gag was taken out, and the German stared at his captors

"Donnerblitz! You will be the two Englanders they were looking for!" he said, in his own tongue.

"The very same," Stephen replied, "an' as we haven't got season tickets, we're ridin' in the van. It was gettin' rather hot yonder, an' this train is doin' us a good turn in takin' us out of it."

"You will be caught and shot when we reach London, for all that!" growled the guard.

"London!" exclaimed Sam. "That's givin' the show away! So this train's goin' through without a stop—I was afraid they'd be pullin' up at the stations. By gum, Steve, nothin' could possibly have happened better!"

"It is a bit of luck!" said his brother gleefully. "I suppose we'll be able to hop off this concern when it suits us; she don't travel very fast. That'll cover nearly forty miles of country for us. What's all this pile of rubbish?"

There was a small oil lamp fixed to the wall, and they overhauled the pile of clothes. They proved to be bundles

of dungaree overalls such as the lower grades of the German service railwaymen—stokers, truck men, and the like—wore over their uniforms.

"We might as well annex a suit of these apiece, I think," said Sam. "The train might stop somewhere, an' we'd stand a good chance of not bein' spotted if we got away in 'em! As long as we're in the enemy's district, I vote we wear 'em!"

"All right! Cadet uniforms'll be as good as a death-warrant to us anywhere this side of the Thames. I don't like wearing these sky-blue duds!" said Stephen, searching for a pair that fitted him, consisting of jumper and trousers; "but we'll be no use as dead men."

They arrayed themselves in the overalls, and selected a couple of caps from a long bundle of them, hiding their own in their jumpers. Then they surveyed each other and grinned.

"We might take a job on the line for a day or two if there was time," chuckled Sam, "but I think things are comin' to a head, an' the sooner we get back to the League, the better!"

"I wonder if we could get across the river to-night? This concern oughtn't to take more than two hours to reach Liverpool Street, if that's her destination, even though she's slow. Where are we now?"

He found it almost impossible to guess, for the windows were all blocked up from the outside and the only aperture was a narrow slit cut right through the wall of the van on either hand.

"What the dickens sort of a train is it?" said Stephen. "What's all this iron for outside?"

The answer came by way of a faint crack, like that of a whip, somewhere out in the night, and then another, and another. Then something rang loudly against the wall of the van, with a vicious smack.

"It's an armoured train, that's about the size of it!" exclaimed Sam. "They've sheathed some of the carriages with bullet-proof sheet-iron. I suppose they get sniped at sometimes, an' that was one of the bullets, eh, Hans?" he said, in German, to the guard, repeating the question. "Isn't that right?"

"Yes," said the man, "some of your cursed sharpshooters and Frontiersmen. We've scoured the country, but still there are some left. I saw five hanged on one tree a couple of days ago!"

"Did you?" said Sam grimly. "You an' your pals had best make the most of their time—they won't hang many more. Good men! I suppose they lie up in the daytime, an' take their chance at night. Does hangin' stop it?"

"No," growled the German; "only for the ones that are hanged."

"I'd like to hang the German beasts who do it!" muttered Stephen. "You'd think they'd be sportsmen enough to—— Hallo, there's a good dose!"

A regular splutter and blaze of rifle-fire suddenly broke out, and the bullets drummed and rang all over the train. A scream of pain was heard from the next carriage, and even in the guard's brake a bullet came in through the slit in the wall and flattened itself on the opposite side.

"Give it 'em!" cried Stephen, as if addressing the sharpshooters. "Pepper 'em, boys!"

The whir and rattle of a small machine gun somewhere on the train suddenly answered the firing, but the attack did not slacken, and the train, now going at its utmost speed, ran for over a minute through a sharp, scattered fire.

"That's the work of the League!" said Sam joyfully. "It's no mere sharpshootin'. They're tryin' their wings! Mulholland's up an' doing!"

"Isn't it a bit rash to show their hand till they're ready?" said Stephen.

"I reckon the leaders know what they're doin'!" Sam stopped himself abruptly, for it occurred to him the guard might understand a little English. "I don't see they can do much harm to a train like this," he added. "If it held troops, it'd be different!"

"I believe there are two or three carriages of soldiers."

"It's mostly a stores train, though—perhaps ammunition, too!"

"I say," exclaimed Stephen, "I wonder if——"

Crash!

There was a tremendous shock, a thudding explosion somewhere ahead, and before Stephen knew what had happened, he was thrown off his feet and hurled across the compartment.

The van seemed to be bouncing along in great bounds for a second or two, and then, with a violent lurch, turned over on its side. Prisoner and captors were all thrown together in a bunch, and then the noise gave way to a moment of silence that was even worse. It was soon broken by shouts, cries, groans, and the loud hissing of steam

"The blessed train's wrecked!" gasped Sam, groping his way along the van's wall. "Steve, are you hurt?"

"No, I don't think so. Where's the German?"

"He's all right. We must get out of this quick, before any meddlin' rescuers come."

The van had taken no great hurt beyond overturning, and the occupants escaped with a shaking. But the lamp had naturally been extinguished, and it was hard work to know where they were in the darkness. Sam struck a match, and overhead they saw the door-handles on the upper side.

They managed to reach them, getting a foothold on the fixed travelling seat; but it was a difficult business to open the door. Between them they contrived to do it, however, urged by the knowledge that certain death awaited them if they were found there with the guard, and they scrambled out and shut the door down again.

"He'll have to whoop until somebody pulls him out," said Sam. "Now for it!"

They jumped down, but almost into the arms of an excited rescue party of Germans, the sergeant in charge of which actually caught Sam by the arm.

"You were in the train!" he cried. "Here, get this poor chap out quickly! Lever up the woodwork, so!"

Stephen's hand had flown to his revolver before he realised, with a gasp, that they were both taken for German railwaymen. The third coach from the end was almost completely smashed, and an unfortunate German corporal was lying with a large beam pinning him down by the legs.

The boys darted forward and lent a hand at once. Two German soldiers were levering the beam up, and Sam and Stephen drew the injured man gently out. By some chance he was not very seriously injured, but badly bruised.

"So! Now on to the next coach!" cried the sergeant, who was labouring and swearing valiantly. "They want more help there. Ach, the verfluchte Englanders who have done this! We will hang every man in the neighbourhood to make sure! Go on, fools, to the next coach!"

"Yes, sergeant!" said Sam, in a strong north German accent. "Come!" he said to Stephen in the same tongue, pulling him by the arm. They hurried onwards towards the coach where several men were at work with lanterns; but instead of joining them, the boys seized the opportunity to dart away in the darkness and slipped through the fence beyond the metals.

"Let 'em look to their own troubles," said Sam. "I'm sorry for the beggars that are hurt, but the Kaiser's men must take what comes on an English railway. It's all in the war game."

He paused and looked back. The rear end of the train had escaped lightly, but in front the trucks and carriages were piled in heaps, and the engine was not much more than a mass of scrap-iron.

"Great Scott, what a smash it is!" said Stephen aghast.

"It's the League's work, of course. Somebody must have laid a charge of glycerine on the line and blown the engine up. They've played Old Harry with a tremendous big load of German stores, that are probably badly wanted at the front. Come on an' let's make a good offing. There'll be the Uhlans scourin' the whole place soon."

Away they went, and here they found the country as bare of Germans as it had been full of them near Thetfield and Witham. The ride in the train had been short, and Sam had no difficulty in discovering where he was. The boys were not far to the north of Chelmsford, and they struck away still farther inland to the westward at their best pace, without incident of any kind.

Stephen had been silent since they left the wrecked train, and when Sam called a halt to consider their next move, he saw his brother looked unusually white.

"What's wrong, Steve? Did you get hurt in the smash?"

"No! It's rather turned my stomach, though, that bit of work," said Stephen moodily. "I s'pose it's right, but it didn't look like playin' the game to me. Dynamite wreckin' a train, and the wretched fellows all smashed up—well——"

"Steve, old boy," said his brother seriously, "war's war, an' it's a dashed ugly game. Which is right, to let that train full of Germans take their stores an' stuff to London and help butcher our men, or to blow the whole lot up? Look here, I'll show you something you haven't noticed yet apparently, an' which I didn't intend to point out to you. It ought to cure you."

He drew Stephen a few paces to one side, and pointed upwards. From the gnarled limb of an old oak-tree on the hillside, showing clear against the starry sky, hung four limp, silent forms, each with a rope attaching it to the bough, and swaying gently in the night breeze.

"Good Heavens!" muttered Stephen. "Are they——"

"Britishers—Volunteer Sharpshooters or Frontiersmen—perhaps of the League. Strung up on sight, for being found armed, of course. You remember what the railway guard said?"

"We must cut them down," said Stephen thickly. "Sam——"

"No," said his brother; "push ahead! It's no time for

paying empty civilities to dead men; they're past thanking you. For all they've been given a felon's death, I may say they died with honour! But while we're alive we've work to do."

"Come on!" muttered Stephen, stepping out. "I wish I'd laid that dynamite myself!"

The Scout's Balloon.

They journeyed through the night for some time, Sam choosing the route and taking all precautions. Not a German did they see, though they knew Chelmsford must be well picketed, and would have to be skirted.

"Where d'you reckon to get to?" said Stephen, as Sam stopped and looked at his battered but still faithful watch.

"Not much farther, I'm afraid. It's within half an hour of daylight, and we shall have to lie up somewhere. We must take the whole of to-morrow night an' get right through. Let's see if there's a farm or a house somewhere that might put us up. We need grub badly, if we can get it."

"We're well off the main road routes," said Stephen. "It's pretty lonely an' desolate about here. There's a farmstead or something over beyond there, I think."

They moved in the direction of a considerable block of barns and buildings, whose outline was to be seen.

"Better make sure there ain't any Germans quartered there," suggested Stephen, "before we knock 'em up."

"We'll take a good look first; but that's not likely, so far from anywhere. We stand a lot more danger goin' to a British farmhouse in these German uniform duds. They'll think we've come to hang somebody," said Sam bitterly. "Let's get 'em off."

They halted by a hedge-side, and slipped out of the German dungarees.

"Don't chuck 'em away, anyhow," said Stephen. "Roll 'em up, and carry 'em under your arm."

"We've got to practically spy on the house first, which is a bit risky," said Sam; "because, if the owners spot us, they may mistake our intentions an' serve us a hot dish. Go gently!"

They made a stealthy approach towards the house, and had to get over a rather awkward, high fence, which seemed to run round the entire place, and the gate of which was padlocked. They had still some way to go to reach the house itself, when suddenly a tall figure rose out of the grass behind them.

Sam turned sharply, for so well had the man, whoever he was, lain hidden, that the boys had walked right past him before he showed himself. He was an Englishman—at any rate, he wore no uniform, though his face could not be seen. He stood quite still for a moment, and the boys and the stranger faced each other.

"Who are you?" said the man, in a quiet voice.

"Britishers," said Sam, "hopin' for a day's lodging. A corner in the barn would do. And if you'd a chunk of bread to spare——"

"I'm sorry," said the stranger abruptly. "You can't stay here."

The boys were surprised, for in those troublous times no Englishman refused shelter to another, especially to Service men.

"The dawn will soon be on us," said Sam, "and I don't mind telling you it'll go hard with us if the drabcoats find us. However, if you're afraid of our bringin' trouble on you——" he concluded scornfully.

The man raised one hand, and, as if by accident, made the sign of the League of Britons. Sam saw it, and at once replied with the countersign, his left first and fourth fingers slightly raised in answer. Stephen followed suit.

"Ah," said the man quietly, "very good! I see. But, all the same, you mustn't stay here. I'll find you shelter and food as well, though, at a neighbour's. Come with me."

"Oh, all right, if it's on the League's account!" murmured Sam. And the man led them to the locked gate. As he did so, and the starlight fell full on the boys' faces, he paused and looked at them more keenly.

"Don't I know your looks somehow?" he said.

"I don't remember ever meetin' you," returned Sam, peering at him. "But our name's Villiers. We're brothers."

"What! The Greyfriars pair—eh?"

"Yes."

The man paused again.

"This alters the case," he said. "I didn't know who you were. Are you on any special service now?"

"Not exactly at the moment, but we want to get to London, an' over the river as soon as we can, to join Mulholland."

"Ah, I fancy we can put you up, after all! D'you mind waitin' a moment while I speak to a friend about it?"

Sam assented, and the stranger disappeared into the house.

"D'you think it's all right?" whispered Stephen.

"Right as rain! He's straight. And a Leaguer, too!"

The man was back in a few moments, and much more cordial.

"Will you come in?" he said. "My name's Mansfield, by the way. I've one or two friends here."

He showed the way through several queer old rooms that opened into each other to a small parlour, where a slim, dark-haired, keen-looking young man of about twenty-six was standing.

"This is my friend, Mr. Kirkby," said Mansfield to the boys. "A Leaguer also."

"Glad to meet you," said the young man, gripping the boys by the hand, and looking at them sharply. "Heard a lot about you. You're off the sea, then? How did you come through?"

Sam gave him a short account of the retaking of Maldon, and of their journey through, including the train-wreck.

"That's well up to your form, I should say," said Kirkby, nodding. "Very smart work!"

"We had pretty good luck," said Stephen.

"It's we who're in luck. You two chaps are just what we want," Kirkby replied. "The question is, are you willing to go straight on to South London?"

"By daylight, through the German lines?"

"Yes, I'll take you if you'll come."

"Don't know that we need any taking," said Sam, rather shortly. "If it were possible at all, I reckon I'd find the way myself quicker than anybody would take me."

"I think you'll alter your opinion about that in a minute," said the young man, smiling. "Just come this way, will you? I wouldn't pretend to teach you anything about scouting, or finding your way over Essex. But there's something here which rather gives me the pull."

He led the boys, both rather puzzled, out into a yard, and then through the door of a large barn.

Beyond the barn was a sort of large farmyard or enclosure, entirely shut in by tall sheds, buildings, and granaries. In the middle of the yard was an object rather like a very big apple-basket, with a number of ropes attached, and covering all the ground beyond was a vast silk cushion, quilted with cords.

"A balloon!" exclaimed Sam. "By Jove, how on earth did you get the thing here? Is that what you're goin' to travel in?"

"That's it. I'm a balloonist, and also a member of the League. I've got to reconnoitre the whole of the country between here and London, and make a plan of the whole German positions, and line of communications, artillery, and everything else. They're dead on scouts, an' this is the only way to do it surely and quickly."

"It is, an' that's a fact!"

"This northerly wind will take us across country in no time. We shall be over London and south of the Thames by noon, or earlier. Now, d'you reckon I can take you quicker than you'd go alone?" said Kirkby, smiling.

"I do, by gum!" said Sam. "I take it all back. But this beats me entirely. A balloon in the heart of the country held by the enemy. How the dickens did you get it here?"

"Oh, that's a long story! I smuggled it in bit by bit, and put it together here. It took a fortnight. I'm an old hand at this air game, you know; it's the only thing I care about. We made the basket here ourselves of osiers. I've got my generating plant for gas in the shed there, and my pal Morton's fillin' the bag now. As soon as we turn all the accumulators on, she'll fill up at twice the speed."

"My word!" said Stephen. "But haven't the Germans interfered?"

"We're well out of the way here; these buildings hide our game; and, besides, we've kept the sharpest sort of look-out. Mansfield surprised you in the garden, didn't he?"

"Somewhat," said Mansfield, grinning.

"That's why we couldn't put you up," said Kirkby. "We couldn't risk strangers knowing about the thing. But when we heard who you were, it occurred to us you might be useful. Now, you know this Essex country like a book, don't you?"

"Every inch of it," said Sam.

"And I don't," continued Kirkby. "You're well up in the German corps, an' know 'em by sight, I s'pose? So do I to some extent; but you'll make a better chart, and, anyway, it's awkward running the balloon and doing that sort of work as well. None of these chaps can come with me. And, lastly, I happen to know that Mulholland wants you in London as soon as you can be got there, and I'm a League man. Will you come, both of you?"

"Like a shot!" cried Sam, and his brother echoed him.

"But will the balloon carry three of us when it was only meant for one?"

"Easily," said Kirkby. "I've only to leave a couple of hundredweight of ballast behind. She'll go all the better with less dead weight, and I'll bet you she's a soarer! Now, we must bustle!"

He entered the shed, where another League man was at work, and the great silk envelope of the balloon, now only half filled, began to inflate and rise till it was clear of the ground, taut-stretched, and straining at the ropes of the car, which was fastened down strongly. The top of the great pear-shaped bag now showed high over the barn roofs.

"Now then," cried Kirkby, flinging a case of instruments and a couple of rifles into the car, "in with you, lads! There's the east lightening, and the sooner we're away the better. It's a hangin' job for the pals we leave behind here if the Germans see us go."

The boys obliged instantly.

"Ready?" said Kirkby.

The ropes were cast off, and, with a jerk, the balloon shot high into the air, and sailed along swiftly before the northerly wind. The dawn was rising, and the German camp at Ingatestone was shining white in the grey light of daybreak as the balloon drifted rapidly towards it.

An Inopportune Gale.

The German bugles, far ahead, were heard faintly calling the reveille as the balloon drifted along before the chill wind of the dawn. Sam and Stephen looked down with keen interest as the Essex countryside unfolded itself under the growing light. It was the first time they had been aloft above the earth since Sam's journey in the captive balloon that broke adrift at Southminster.

"This is great!" said Stephen appreciatively. "We shall be a long time reachin' London, though, at this pace."

"We're going a lot faster than you think," said Kirkby, emptying half a bag of sand over the side.

"Why, we seem to be standin' still!"

"Yes, we do; but if you were on that road below there, you'd find you couldn't keep under the balloon, running as fast as you liked. Hallo, we're spotted!"

Voices were heard shouting from an open space near the road below, and several German figures could be made out in the dim light of the dawn; and upturned faces were seen gazing at the balloon, which was not more than two hundred yards high as yet. Then the crack of a rifle-shot rang out; but nothing was heard of the bullet, though it ought to have been audible if it passed anywhere near.

"We shall be shot in the soles of our boots if they do get us," remarked Sam. "I say, wouldn't it be a good plan to put a bullet-proof plating on the floor of these balloons?"

"It's the hardest thing going to hit a balloon in the air," said Kirkby, "though you wouldn't think it. The chief thing to fear is a shell rippin' the gas-container open. Then you go to kingdom come by the quickest road. But we'll soon be out of reach of that lot."

The breeze freshened even as he spoke, and the knot of Germans were left out of sight surprisingly quick, proving to Stephen's satisfaction that he had misjudged the balloon's pace. Kirkby gave a sigh of relief.

"Now, I don't care if it snows," he said. "I was precious anxious lest we should get spotted before we were well clear of the farm, for fear the enemy might guess where she came from. It would have been a bad look-out for my friends there."

"What would the Germans have done?"

"Hanged the blessed lot of them, of course! Strung 'em up to the trees round the homestead. That's what the beasts call 'stern repressive measures.' They think it scares the others off."

"It might scare Germans off, but it don't pay with British folk," said Sam grimly. "My word! If the day of reckoning really comes, there'll be little quarter for any man in a German uniform! I say, Kirkby, what a skit of men they've got at the camp yonder. I must get a note of that."

He took out his notebook, and made a rapid report of the strength and disposition of the German force at the Ingatestone camp. Nobody could have been fitter for the job than Sam, for there was not a corps in the whole German service whose uniform he did not know. Horse, foot, and guns, he noted them all down, with the preparations they had made.

The balloon was much higher by this time, and had attracted the attention of the whole camp. It was drifting across rapidly, the three inmates showing themselves as little as possible, while Sam made his survey. The Germans were staring up at them, as if not knowing what to make of it, for a minute or more.

"They think this is one of their own balloons, I reckon," said Stephen. "It's long odds against a British one bein' here. Else they'd fire."

"As a matter of fact, it is a German balloon," said Kirkby. "It was scoffed from one of their transport-waggons, which a bunch of our frontiersmen cut out an' captured one night. The silk bag was in sections, an' they each brought away one. The basket we made. But those fellows below'll soon see what's wrong, with their field-glasses. Ah, there they go!"

A squad of riflemen in the camp fired up at the balloon, and soon there were shots from every quarter. A stray bullet chipped the edge of the car, and another followed. Some men were seen hastily swinging a Maxim round to bring it to bear. And Kirkby at once flung out three lots of ballast, sacks and all, and the balloon shot upwards like a rocket. By the time the Maxim opened fire, the aeronauts were a tremendous way off.

One of the bags of sand, in falling, struck a tent with tremendous force, and completely wrecked it, smashing the pole. The whir of the Maxim was heard now, but sounded no louder than if somebody were winding up a watch, and where the bullets went there was no saying.

"Why she's handier than a ship at sea!" cried Stephen.

"Yes, we're well out of their reach now. We'll keep well up, too, for a handful of bullets through our envelope 'd make too much of a leak. Here's a pair of strong field-glasses, Villiers, if you want to make out any small details. The breeze is dropping again."

The Germans between Chelmsford and London that day had plenty of time to speculate about the travelling balloon, and probably they cursed it also with point and fluency. Sam had every opportunity to make his war-map complete; for the wind fell very light and variable, and instead of going southward, they drifted over Essex in an aimless sort of way that certainly made the journey longer, but gave much more extended views over the country and the enemy's positions.

"What a dickens of a lot of camps and posts they've got, all over the place!" said Stephen. "I thought they were all gathered round London for the siege."

"They've got to hold the whole country as well," said Sam, "an' do their best to keep it under their thumbs. Else there'd be some rare jobs for them. That's Broxbourne yonder, they've an artillery depot there, I see."

The balloon at one time drifted nearly to the Hertfordshire border, and then back again before a westerly breeze as far as Romford. The vast black burr of London was now right ahead, with the silvery line of the Lower Thames shining like a thread to the eastward. Sam was immensely busy filling in his report.

"This'll give more information than a whole month of scoutin' through the enemy's lines," he said; "only it'll be more use to Lord Ripley an' the regulars than to the League of Britons, who can't hope to succeed except by hand-to-hand fighting in the streets, an' sheer weight of numbers."

"Their chance wouldn't be much if the army didn't tackle the Germans outside in the open as well," said Stephen.

"Don't know that. The Germans have got the whole British nation to face when the League rises. What's up, Kirkby?"

"I don't like the look of the weather," said the balloonist, whose face wore an anxious look; "the wind's dead out, but there'll be a heavy squall brewin', or else a gale. Look at the sky to the eastward."

The balloon was now all but stationary, at an immense height, but the calmness was oppressive and seemed to bode bad weather. In the east, the sky wore a lurid and coppery look, such as seamen and aeronauts know too well.

"There's a heavy wind coming," said Kirkby, "and I only hope it don't drive in the wrong way. We can't possibly drop here, of course, right among the Germans—we must wait for it. But we may have a dickens of a job when it comes to landing."

"Anywhere south of the river would do," said Stephen simply.

"Anywhere! It's easy talking, but we shall have to land where we can, at the risk of our necks, and—— Here it comes! Sit tight!"

Out of the open sky the wind came in one solid, invisible wall, as only it can when a thousand feet above the earth, and as suddenly as a blow with the fist, the balloon reeled and lurched, and then went tearing across the skies at a tremendous pace.

It was an awesome experience. There was not the slightest sound, the great wind came upon them out of the void in dead silence. On land or at sea it would have roared and whistled as gales always do, but up there in the open sky even the hurricane was dumb. The light balloon sped before it like a dry leaf.

"Great Scott!" said Stephen, hanging on to the ropes of the car. "Where are we driving to?"

"It's as I feared," said Kirkby gloomily; "the wind's drawn round into the east, and we're being blown westwards

about as fast as an express train, instead of south where we want to go."

A glance downwards showed his words were only too true. A little while before the balloon had been travelling slowly towards London on a course that would take her across the river. But now she was whirling away over the outskirts of the great city, parallel with the Thames, and right up its course, but to the north of it.

Straight below were the heights guarding London; or, rather, threatening it, crowned with the German batteries that had bombarded and wrecked the metropolis. Muswell Hill and Hornsey were just under the balloon, a thousand feet below, but so fast was it travelling that they were rapidly left behind. Highgate was passed soon after, and the Welsh Harp, looking like a mere puddle, was soon directly underneath, and presently fading behind again. Only by watching the earth could the boys make any guess how fast they were going.

"I say, where on earth shall we end up?" said Sam, looking rather blue.

"I'd tell you, if I knew. Things look pretty bad. The Germans hold every post all along this side of the Thames." said Kirkby. "I'd give a couple of fingers if we could only have got across the river before it came on."

"No use landing anywhere here," said Stephen.

"Great Scott, no! Besides, we can't very well land anywhere while it blows like this. It'd be small chances for any of us to get out of the car alive."

"But we shall be blown to America if we hold on."

"It's too hard to last; the wind'll ease a bit soon. If it does, our only hope is that it'll draw a little more out from the northward," said the aeronaut, looking anxiously at the eastern sky; "it's quite likely to."

"I wish we'd got one of those steerable affairs, like the one the Furst Moltke wrecked," said Stephen.

"They'd be no use in a gale like this. Nothing but an aeroplane with powerful engines could do it, if that."

"Very well in their way, but they've got a few drawbacks," said Sam, looking ruefully at the county of Buckingham slipping away underneath them, for the London suburbs had already been left behind. "We were due in Kent to-night, an' here we are goin' goodness knows where."

"It'll be dark soon, too," added Stephen. "We were a long time drifting about when it was calm. Well, Mulholland'll have to rub along without us, and I don't suppose our absence'll make much difference to the fate of the League," he added, with a dry laugh. "Hallo, the earth's out of sight now!"

A drifting blanket of wet, ragged clouds, whirled along before the gale, covered the balloon like a blanket, overtaking and enshrouding her. Far below, other storm clouds were scudding, blotting out the earth altogether.

"This is cheerful," said Sam, his teeth chattering. "It's as cold as January."

They huddled together and shivered. For their clothes were thin, and the raw, damp cold of the clouds chilled them to the bone. For quite a long time they drove onwards, seeing nothing, and Kirkby opened his valve slightly from time to time and allowed the balloon to descend several hundred feet, his aneroid instruments warning him of the height.

A Violent Landing.

"By Jove, the wind has shifted!" Kirkby exclaimed, glancing at his compass. "It's drawn more from the nor'rard, as I hoped. We are heading to the north-west!"

The storm-clouds drove away even as he spoke, the sky became clearer, and the earth, though darkening rapidly as the evening shades drew in, showed below. No trace of the Thames was to be seen. The balloon was drifting swiftly over a tract of cornfields and large pastures, but right ahead was a great open tract of bare country, with few hedges or houses.

"We're all right," cried Kirkby. "We must have crossed the river and left it behind, long ago. That's Salisbury Plain ahead. We're well out of the Germans' country!"

"Good!" said Sam, with deep thankfulness. "What about getting out of this now?"

"We'll land at once, as best we can. It'll be a ticklish job, but we'll risk it. The wind isn't quite so strong."

It was not. The gale was dropping fast, but as they neared the ground, it became more apparent than ever what a rate they were travelling at. The ground, now only two hundred feet below, seemed to be spinning away under them.

"My eye!" exclaimed Stephen. "This is going to be hot stuff. Pick us a soft landing-place, Kirkby."

"Yes, don't drop us on the top of Stonehenge," said Sam. "It's somewhere about here, isn't it? There wouldn't be much left of us."

"I can't pick the spot within a few dozen yards, in a wind like this," the aeronaut replied. "You two had better jump for it as soon as the basket touches ground. I'll use the ripping-valve if necessary."

"What's that?"

"This rope here; it rips a strip out of the balloon an' lets the gas out in a hurry. I don't want to use it if I can help. Here's the ordinary valve."

"We're well over the plain now. Precious desolate spot," said Sam. "There's some sort of a house yonder, I think, though," he added, pointing to a dark mass showing on the plain.

"That? It looks more like a wood," said Stephen.

"I can see the roofs of buildings in it, though. Most likely a country manor house among the trees."

Trees and house—if there was one—were low and inconspicuous, but the enclosure covered a good deal of ground. Kirkby nodded as he saw it.

"This'll do us," he said, "though I wish it weren't such a lonely spot. Hope we can get some help from the house, to save the balloon. Look out now!"

They were still two or three hundred yards from the place when Kirkby opened the valve fully, and the balloon rapidly descended. The great bag of gas began to wilt and lean over, the crew stood by for a jump, when suddenly the basket hit the ground with a terrific bump, as it sped along.

So severe was it that they had no chance to make the leap. Kirkby was thrown violently from his hold and against the edge of the basket, and next moment a heavier gust of wind whirled the balloon into the air again, twenty or thirty feet up.

"Stop her, Kirkby! Open her more!" cried Sam, clinging to the ropes.

"He can't—he's knocked out of time," said Stephen; and, indeed, the aeronaut lay gasping in the bottom of the car, the wind knocked out of him, for he had had a heavy shaking, and seemed nearly stunned.

"By Jove, then I'll do it!" cried Sam. "Where's that ripping cord? We shall be into something solid if she goes on like this!"

He found the ripping-cord and pulled it with all his might. The balloon had been whirled along a considerable distance by the wind squall, but once the strip was rent right out of the silk covering, she descended twice as quickly as before.

"Look out! She'll be right among the trees!" shouted Stephen.

The balloon was coming down in a long, rapid slant, straight for the wood, round the outer edge of which was a tall, spiked iron fence. She cleared the tops of the trees, and right below Sam caught sight of a house, and a building like a huge barn or shed, with a corrugated iron roof, and a yard or small clearing, littered with trestles and gear, just beside it. A worse place for descending in could not have been found, and Sam recognised the fact as soon as he had pulled the cord. But it was too late to alter that now.

The balloon drove into the trees beyond, and the car came down with a terrific bump, right in the yard. Kirkby and the boys were thrown out heavily, though the two latter tried to jump and land on their feet. But they rolled over like shot rabbits.

Voices were heard shouting, and before either of the brothers could pull themselves together, or even sit up, each was rushed at and pinned down by a burly man in workman's overalls. Sam felt a revolver instantly pressed to his forehead, and a gruff but educated voice warned him to move at his peril.

Dazed by the shock of the fall and startled at this strange treatment, Sam looked up into the face of his captor, and then to either side. He was lying among a litter of shavings and scrap-iron, and close beside was the end of the great iron-roofed shed, open and in full view.

The sight he saw inside it, even in a single glance, made Sam wonder if he were dreaming. The shed was lighted, and in it was a huge steel structure, shaped like a cigar, and reminding him rather of a ship. A big screw with blades fifteen feet long or more, was fixed at the end nearest him. And even as he glanced at it, the doors that composed the whole end of the shed were hastily slammed to, and the view shut out from him.

"Hold them down!" cried a sharp, commanding voice. "Search them for weapons, and then bind them!"

"Pass a bit of rope here," said Sam's captor. "They aren't Germans though, I think."

"Germans or English, tie them up! We can't afford to take any risks," said the man who had spoken before; and a moment later he came and stood over Sam.

He was a tall, elderly man, of striking appearance, with a pointed, iron-grey beard, and keen, flashing black eyes, that looked Sam through and through with a menacing expression. He scanned both the boys keenly; for Stephen was in the same plight, with a man holding him.

"Ha! Youngsters—eh?" exclaimed the tall man gruffly.

"This one's older," said somebody who was bending over Kirkby, "but he's knocked out—stunned."

"All the better!" said the tall man. "I wish his neck was broken!"

"Here, what the dickens is up?" cried Sam, finding his voice. "Why on earth do you want to bind us?"

"Because you came here unasked," said the tall stranger grimly. "You may be thankful if nothing worse happens to you."

"Unasked!" echoed Sam. "I should think so! We didn't want to land in your yard, and we're sorry if we've done any damage. But why on earth——"

"Service uniforms—eh?" broke in the tall man, looking them over again. "Let that one get on to his feet," he said to Sam's captor. "Now, my lad, speak up quickly. What were you doing in that balloon, and where did it come from?"

Sam thought it best to give the information required, and he told his questioner how they had voyaged from Essex.

"Ah!" said the tall man keenly. "So far so good! I see your story is true. You and your friend here, the civilian, have done a creditable piece of work. But I wish you had descended anywhere but here. You belong to the Service, I perceive. Irregular corps—eh? Well, I'm sorry, but I shall have to keep you prisoners."

"Prisoners!" exclaimed Sam hotly. "What do you mean? You're English, aren't you?"

"Very much so. But there is no help for it. You have seen too much here; and I cannot let you go. Yes; you would give me your word not to talk, no doubt, and in an ordinary case it would be good enough for me—I see you are trustworthy. But I dare take no risk whatever. You and your friends must stay—perhaps for weeks."

"It is impossible, sir!" cried Sam. "I've got maps and reports which must go through to headquarters at once; and we are needed, too, ourselves!"

"My business," said the tall man, "is far more important than fifty reports or a whole army corps! I cannot let you go."

Sam was nonplussed. The odds were all against him, his captors seemed inexorable, and his weapons had been taken from him. He was about to make a defiant reply, when the man with the grey beard interposed again.

"You saw what was in the shed," he said, with a dry nod towards the big iron building, "did you not?"

"Yes," said Sam irritably, for he did not choose to lie about it, even to get away, "I did."

"What did you suppose it to be?"

"An airship, of sorts, I took it for."

"Quite right! And now you see why I must detain you. The secret you have discovered must not go beyond this enclosure in any man's possession."

"Secret!" cried Sam. "But everyone for miles around must know you are building that great thing! The sheds——"

"You are mistaken," said the man. "Not three people in all Britain, outside myself and my helpers here, have the faintest idea of it. This is a lonely spot, the land is my own, and the enclosure guarded with infinite care. It is true," he added grimly, "that two German spies managed to get in a fortnight ago, moved, I suppose, through curiosity, to learn what is afoot here. They were captured, and they will do no more spying. At first, when your balloon appeared so suddenly, I supposed it to be a second attempt. I see I was wrong, but I must keep you, none the less."

John Carfax's Secret.

Sam rarely lost his temper, but he did at this.

"Do you think we're going to be kept prisoners for the sake of a silly airship that will never fly twenty yards?" he cried angrily. "Why, confound it, sir, hasn't this game been tried fifty times, and always fizzled to nothing? My brother and I are in the British Service, and we're not going to be kept from our work by a crank, I promise you!"

The tall man smiled quietly at Sam's wrath, and then looked at him, with knitted brows.

"Haven't I seen your face somewhere?" he said pensively; "and this other lad's too. Where can it have been? What is your name?"

"Lieutenant Villiers!" said Sam hotly. "You don't know me, either, for I've never seen you before in my life. This is my brother Stephen."

"Not the Greyfriars scouts?"

"The same."

"So! This puts quite a new complexion on the matter. I wish I'd known before. Turn them loose, Alick."

The tall man regarded the boys thoughtfully for some moments as they were set free, and his keen black eyes brightened still more.

"I'm hanged if I don't do it!" he said suddenly. "I can rely on your word, I know; but that is not all. I know your record well; and there is no one else in all the country who could be of use to me in the way you can. Is it true that you are in touch with this man Mulholland who has raised the League of Britons?"

"Yes, sir, we are."

"And with the Army authorities, too, I know. They know nothing of this. But I may want a witness, when the time comes, to prove what I shall have to say. Gentlemen, I am going to do a thing never contemplated. I am going to put you in possession of my secret, and give you your liberty, on receiving your parole never to speak a word of it till I call upon you to do so."

"We agree!" said both the brothers eagerly. "You may trust us, sir."

"I know I can. But your friend there, the balloonist, is one too many. It is lucky he is unconscious, and has learned nothing. Alick, take him away and put him in the lodge right out of range before he comes to. He is not seriously hurt, and will presently be himself again. Come this way, my young scouts!"

The doors of the great shed flew open, and the man led Sam and Stephen in. They stood amazed at the size of the vast machine before them. It looked like the framework of an enormous box, open on all sides, and a sort of pent-house or cabin, was on the lower floor of it. A motor-engine, not very big, but greatly compressed and very powerful-looking, was fixed just behind the pent-house. Some huge, lengthy fans, or propeller-blades lay against one of the walls, evidently ready for fitting. The boys were led all round the machine by their host.

"You see that?" said the tall man. "It is the only practical airship ever made by man. An aeroplane, and one equal to anything you may ask of it. With its help I shall dictate terms to the insolent oppressor, Germany, and trail her pride in the dust!"

Stephen's eyes sparkled with excitement, but Sam said nothing. He knew how many attempts have been made by clever men to produce an airship heavier than air, yet able to navigate above the earth, and he was sceptical.

"You doubt its power," said the tall man, looking at Sam with a slight smile. "Come with me, and you shall see and believe."

He led the way to a smaller shed, full of machinery and electrical apparatus. Resting on trestles was a beautifully-made model aeroplane, motor and all, about three feet long, and exactly like the big one in build.

"Every part of this model is scientifically accurate in proportion to the one you have seen, in weight and power," said their host. "It is a small edition of the other. See!"

He set the little motor going, and touched a lever. Easily as a bird the model left the trestles and raised itself three feet, the motor buzzing and the fans spinning smoothly. He made it cruise up and down the shed, circling gently through the air, now slowly, and now as fast as he could run beside it, and never touching it, except to alter the helm or the speed by moving a lever or key. Finally, he made it soar to the top of the shed and back, and then rest again on

the trestles as lightly as a thistledown, though it weighed forty pounds.

The boys looked on in amazement.

"All that this can do the great aeroplane in the shed can do in proportion," said its owner quietly. "That is to say, with much greater speed, and it can also carry four men and seven hundredweight of dead weight. Are you convinced?"

"By Jove, you're right, sir!" exclaimed Sam, with great admiration and respect. "You have conquered the realm of air, and can do all you say!"

"I can indeed. The world shall soon know it."

"And you're going to wipe out the German invaders with this, sir?" cried Stephen eagerly.

Their host shook his head gravely.

"It cannot be ready for some time—perhaps for weeks," he said, "though we are doing our utmost. And for reasons I cannot well explain to you, though they are simple enough, these machines of mine—which can travel continuously for five days— would be of far less use against the Germans here in Britain than in their own land."

Both the brothers wondered why, but their host was evidently not going to explain at the moment.

"Then you mean to carry the war into Germany, sir!" exclaimed Sam.

"Exactly that," said the tall man, with a grim nod. "And it will be an ill day for the German Empire when I rise and steer north."

"I say," cried Stephen, turning to his brother, "couldn't the League wait to rise till these are ready?"

"It is useless," said the scientist. "Britain must save herself, by her own hand and at her own sacrifice. When that is done, I can—and will—strike the blow home at the heart of her enemy, in his own country. I have two of these aeroplanes here—one that you have not seen," he added quietly. "But you have seen enough to be my witness that I speak the truth."

"We have," said Sam earnestly. "If ever you've need of our word, we'll speak when and where you order us."

"And till then, no matter what befall, I hold you to absolute silence," said the tall man slowly. "And now, you will wish to get back to your duty. I know your services are valuable, and would be missed. A motor-car shall run you over at once to Basingstoke, whence you will be able to get a place on one of the military trains to London. There will be several running to Waterloo to-night."

"Thank you, sir," said Sam. "Nothing could suit us better. And may we ask your name?"

"It is John Carfax," said the tall man; "but make no mention of it yet."

The boys gave him their word, and he led them through a maze of sheds into the dark wood beyond, and so to a little lodge by the iron railings outside. Here a small but powerful motor-car soon appeared at the gates, and Kirkby, still looking rather dazed, but unhurt, was helped into it.

"Good-bye," said Carfax, giving each of the boys a grip of his sinewy hand; "or, rather, au revoir, I hope. Don't forget what I told you."

The car throbbed away into the night—the chauffeur was the man who had pinioned Sam — and the boys, taking a look back at the dark enclosed wood, through which none of the buildings were now visible, glanced at each other, and each drew a long breath.

"That beats the dickens!" said Stephen. "Isn't it a marvel?"

"He's right, though," said Sam, with a nod. "He can do all he claims, I'll bet. Hallo, here's Kirkby wakin' up! How d'you feel, old chap?"

"All right; but I've had a rare thump on the head, I think," said Kirkby, rather dizzily. "Who was it picked us up? The owner of that homestead, wasn't it? I've been sitting in the gatekeeper's lodge, feeling like change for a bad shilling. Where's the balloon?"

"I'll have it sent on after you—I mean my master will," put in the chauffeur, without turning his head. "It isn't much damaged."

"It's all right, Kirkby; we fell among friends," said Stephen. "Lie back and take it easy. You've had a jolt-up. We're all goin' through to London."

The car, after a rapid run over some distance of country, put them down at Basingstoke Station; and no sooner were they afoot than the chauffeur, with a wave of his hand to the boys, went whirring back in the direction he had come.

A military train was loading up with stores for the troops in South London, and the two young scouts had no difficulty in getting themselves passes for it from the staff officer, and one for Kirkby. They also managed to get hold of some rations, and were glad to have them. The train left at midnight, and having many stoppages to make, was a long time on the journey—indeed, it was five a.m. when it steamed into Waterloo. The boys slept soundly all the way.

They bade Kirkby—who had to go to his own League commandant at the Borough—a warm farewell, with the hopes of seeing him again before the fracas was over.

Sam learned that Mulholland was then in headquarters of his own, whence he transacted the work of the League, in Blackfriars Road. After sending off the maps and reports at once to Lord Ripley, the boys made, without any delay, for the League leader's abode.

They found him in a large, bare room, with two secretaries, working strenuously. He was pale, haggard, and worn, but the unconquerable light in his eyes—the eyes that no man ever forgot who saw them—burned more strongly than ever. He rose quickly to his feet as the boys came in, and shook hands with them heartily, dismissing his secretaries with a pile of despatches to attend to.

"I was afraid you had come to grief," he said. "I know of your start at dawn yesterday in Kirkby's balloon. What news?"

Sam gave it him, as briefly as possible, leaving out nothing except Carfax's story, as in duty bound.

"How are things here?" asked Sam, when he had reported. "How's the League, and when will it rise? Or is that a secret?"

"Not from you," said Mulholland. "The League rises to-night. We have a million men with Lord Ripley outside London, another million behind them, and a million here in South London. At midnight all Britain, every man who can hold a weapon, or has even his bare hands to slay with, rises against the German invader!"

"To-night?" cried both the young scouts.

"Ay, to-night! And I was never more glad to see you two, for you're just the mascots we want, and you'll be equal to the job I've got for you. Are you willing to strike the first blow and lead the forlorn hope?"

"What, Steve and I?" cried Sam. "Won't we—if you'll trust it to us! But what can we do?"

"I'll tell you. It may cost you your lives."

"We've risked them before now."

"But not as you'll risk them to-night. It will be yours to give the signal that shall set all Britain aflame from north to south, and lead the attack. Are you ready?"

"Give us our orders!" cried Sam and Stephen together. "We're ready!"

"Well said!" exclaimed Mulholland, rising from his seat. "I knew I could rely on you. And here are your orders.

"Our first blow will be struck, not by marching upon London, but in the very midst of the Germans themselves. It is on the north side of the river, where Von Krantz's army holds the whole town under his thumb, that we shall commence. All things are ready. Now, look at this map."

(Another long instalment of this thrilling serial next week.)

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