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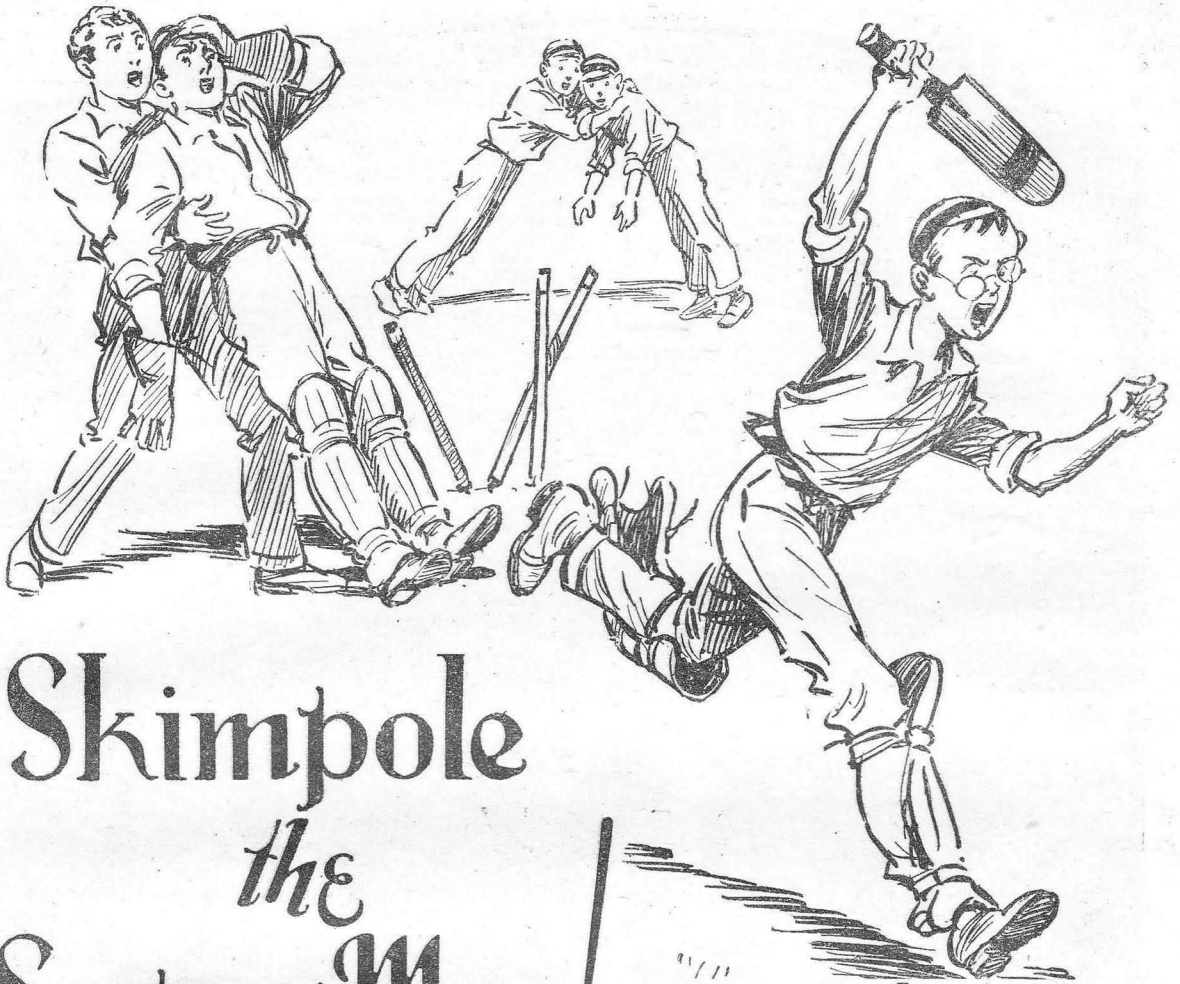
THE GEM ^{2^d}

EVERY WEDNESDAY.



"LET'S BUMP HIM!" SAID THE MASTER.

WHO SAYS A SPOT OF FISTICUFFS WITH SKIMPOLE?—



Skimpole *the* Super-Man!

By
MARTIN CLIFFORD

CHAPTER 1.
Ratty Ratty!

“**CHEEK!**”

“Nerve!”
“What next?” demanded George Figgins of the New House at St. Jim’s, as a supplement to the remarks of his chums, George Francis Kerr and Fatty Wynn.

The three stalwarts of the New House were fairly radiating righteous indignation.

Afternoon classes had just finished, and Figgins & Co. were standing under the trees near the main New House building, watching the progress of a thin, weedy youth who was travelling across the quad towards them.

One glance at that weedy form and massive brow and gleaming spectacles was enough to tell any St. Jim’s man that Herbert Skimpole, the genius of the School House, was approaching.

As usual, Skimpole was reading. On most occasions he carried about with him one or other of the celebrated works of Professor Balm-crumpet. This time, by way of an exception, he was immersed in a newspaper.

Now there was no law against Skimpole’s reading a newspaper and taking a walk simultaneously if he chose to

do so. But there is a well-understood law that School House fellows who wandered into the New House territory did so at their own risk; and Herbert Skimpole was undoubtedly wandering into New House territory just now.

“Ever see anything like it?” asked Kerr. “Walking over here just as if the place belongs to him! We shall have dozens of ‘em at this rate!”

“Awful prospect!” grinned Figgins. “We’ll soon put a stop to this perambulating brain-box, anyway. Hi, Skimpole!”

“Have to yell at the blighter!” said Fatty Wynn. “Hey, Skimpole! Skimmy!”

“Where the thump do you think you’re going?” roared Kerr. “Skimmy!”

The genius of the Shell looked up with a start. “Dear me! Are you addressing me, my good youths?” he asked mildly.

“We are, we is—every youth among us!” grinned Figgins. “Now, what’s the big idea, Skimmy?”

“My good fellow—”
“Don’t you realise that your mouldy School House number nines are treading on sacred New House ground?” asked Kerr sternly.

“I protest, my dear Kerr, that I have never worn a number nine—”
“Ha, ha, ha!”

THE AGE OF MIRACLES IS HERE!

Yesterday—

Skimpole the Harmless
“ the Duffer
“ the Weak-kneed

To-day—

Skimpole the Fearless
“ the Fighter
“ the Cricketer

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—YOU'LL GET A SHOCK IF YOU DO! FOR HE'S CHANGED NOW!

"Got to explain things pretty simply to this merchant!" remarked Figgins. "Get this well into your nut, Skimmy; you come from a mouldy, moth-eaten casual ward of a place called the School House—"

"Hear, hear!"—from Kerr and Wynn. "No member of which has any right to introduce his contaminated body into the distinguished New House—"

"My hat! You're good enough for the Westminster Gas House!" said Fatty Wynn admiringly.

"In other words," said Figgins, blushing slightly, "School House worms have to keep over on their side. And you're strayed!"

"My dear, good Figgins—"
"No argument!" said Figgins, with a majestic wave of his hand. "We don't argue with School House wasters—we simply dictate to 'em!"

"Hear, hear!"
"My good fellow, if I have in any way offended—"

"You have!"
"I sincerely regret—"

"You're going to regret still more in a minute!" said Figgins darkly. "Don't think we bear you any ill-will, Skimmy; we don't! But the New House prestige must be upheld, and if you will do these things you've got to put up with the consequences!"

"W-w-w-what are you going to do, my good youth?"

"Just what I've been wondering?" said Figgins thoughtfully. "It's a bit of a problem, but I think if we rub a lot of mud over your face—"

"What!"
"And turn your jacket inside out—"

"Eh?"
"And pin a warning notice to you—"

"M-m-my good fellow—"

"And tie up your hands and feet and let you hop back to your native haunts," said Figgins, "then I think that will just about meet the bill. Collar him, chaps!"

"What-ho!"
And Kerr and Fatty Wynn, grinning cheerfully, joined their eloquent leader in a rush on the genius of the Shell.

Skimpole, for once in his brainy career moved to action, dodged.

Figgins & Co., with ringing war-whoops, cut off his retreat to the School House, and Skimpole, in desperation, turned back again and made a bolt towards the gymnasium, a red brick building standing in New House territory.

"After him!" roared Figgins.

"STOP!"
The stern command came with the suddenness of a thunderbolt.

Figgins & Co. stopped. Simultaneously they groaned. All three recognised the acid accent of that "Stop!" only too well.

Mr. Ratcliff, the sour-tempered Housemaster of the New House, had, with an unexpectedness that seemed natural in him, appeared from behind a neighbouring shrubbery.

"Ratty!" groaned Figgins.

"Just like the rotter!" mumbled Fatty Wynn. "G-good afternoon, sir!"

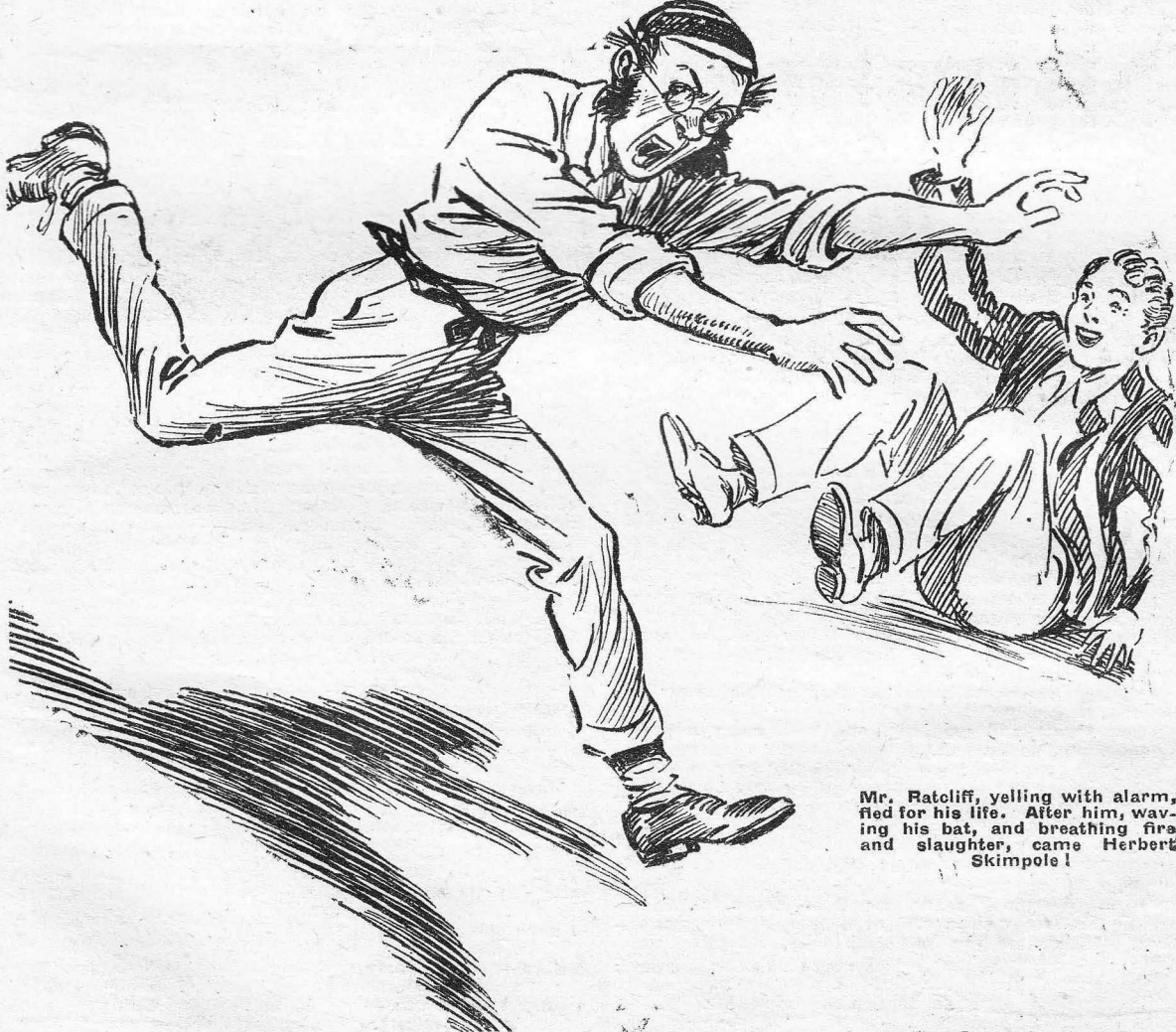
Mr. Ratcliff disdainfully ignored the salutation and eyed the heroes of the New House with a hostile eye.

"More hooliganism!" he snapped. "Another example of the ruffianly horseplay I have learned to expect from you!"

"Not at all, sir!" Figgins felt constrained to say.

Mr. Ratcliff elevated his eyebrows.

"You are impudent, Figgins! You dare to deny that you were just about to commit a savage assault on a defenceless School House boy?"



Mr. Ratcliff, yelling with alarm, fled for his life. After him, waving his bat, and breathing fire and slaughter, came Herbert Skimpole!

"Well, my hat!" gasped Kerr. It required quite an effort of the imagination to link their intended good-humoured ragging of Skimpole with the idea of a savage and unprovoked assault on a defenceless boy.

Mr. Ratcliff half-raised the walking-stick he was carrying, as though he felt tempted to lay it over the shoulders of the Scots junior. But he restrained himself with an effort and lowered it again.

"You may lie as much as you like——" he began.

"We're not lying!" said Figgins indignantly.

"I say you may lie as much as you like," repeated Mr. Ratcliff, with emphasis, "but you will not eradicate from my mind the impression that you were just about to indulge in an act of bullying towards a weaker lad——"

"Rot!" exclaimed Figgins. He simply couldn't help himself.

Mr. Ratcliff jumped.

"What—what——"

"Sheer rot!" said Figgins hotly. "You know dashed well that we're not bullies——"

Figgins stopped short and took a step back. It was an instinctive response to Mr. Ratcliff's move forward.

The sour-tempered Housemaster had temporarily lost control of himself at the sound of that "Rot!" With a sharp movement he had raised his hand and swept it round with the intention of boxing Figgins' ears.

But Figgins stepped back, and instead of hitting that cheery junior's ears, Mr. Ratcliff only succeeded in hitting thin air.

Crash!

The change of programme was fatal.

Mr. Ratcliff, with a yell, overbalanced and fell headlong to the ground. Almost instantly he was up again, his face white with rage.

"That's done it!" murmured Fatty Wynn.

And it had!

The Housemaster eyed them for just one instant. Then, with a stifled exclamation, he lifted his walking-stick and waded in.

Figgins & Co. were not exactly cowards. But they didn't like the look of that walking-stick, and they didn't stop to argue with it; instead, they simply turned tail and fled towards the gym.

Mr. Ratcliff, his blood fairly up now, raced after them.

They disappeared round the corner of the red brick building.

Mr. Ratcliff followed.

Then came disaster.

Just as the infuriated Housemaster rounded the bend, a weedy youth rounded it in the opposite direction.

It was Herbert Skimpole again. And the genius of the Shell, being more engrossed in his newspaper, had neither eyes nor ears for the precipitate approach of Mr. Ratcliff.

They crashed—head-on, so to speak. And a wild, agonised duet went up as Mr. Ratcliff and Skimpole went down on the gravel path with a dreadful bump.

"Yaroooooogh!"

"Whooooop!"

CHAPTER 2.

Ticked Off!

WHOOOOP! Ugh-huh! Poof!"

Thus Horace Ratcliff, M.A.

"Ow! Groogh! Ooooch!"

Thus Herbert Skimpole.

The two sat down on the gravel path for several seconds eyeing each other dizzily and gasping and puffing like a couple of specimens of the grampus family.

"You—you—ouch!" said Mr. Ratcliff.

"I—I—groogh!" said Skimpole.

And that was about as far as they got for some little time.

Then, slowly and painfully, and with many a groan, Skimpole rose to his feet.

He had hardly sorted out his aching limbs before a bark from Mr. Ratcliff brought him to attention with a violent start.

"Boy!"

"Ow!"

"BOY!" hooted Mr. Ratcliff. "BOY!"

"My d-d-dear sir——"

"How dare you!" roared the New House tyrant, regaining his feet with a sort of hop-skip-and-jump movement. "How dare you knock me down, I say?"

For a moment, Skimpole had vague ideas at the back of his head of giving Mr. Ratcliff the "et tu quoque." After all, if it came to that, how dared Mr. Ratcliff knock down Skimpole?

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But Skimpole, whose courage was not exactly his long suit, hesitated at asking that pertinent question, and merely blinked at Mr. Ratcliff through his big spectacles and mumbled.

"I—I——"

"Answer me, sir!"

"I—I—I——"

"Reckless, insolent creature!" thundered Mr. Ratcliff, thereby slightly misdescribing the wretched genius of the Shell, who looked the reverse of reckless and insolent just then. "You shall pay dearly for your temerity. Come here, sir!"

But Skimpole, apparently, was not feeling in the "come hither" mood. He backed.

Mr. Ratcliff advanced, his walking-stick again at a warlike angle.

Then came salvation, swift and unexpected, to the hapless Herbert Skimpole.

Unseen by Mr. Ratcliff, a stately figure in cap and gown had for some seconds been drawing nearer and nearer from the School House side of the quad.

At Mr. Ratcliff's last move that figure had accelerated, and before the Housemaster of the New House had time to begin any kind of assault and battery upon the bony person of Herbert Skimpole, it had reached the scene of the argument.

A voice spoke, a quiet, firm voice which established the identity of the newcomer instantly. And Mr. Ratcliff dropped his walking-stick and uttered a startled gasp.

"Mr. Ratcliff!"

"Oh!"

The Housemaster looked round and blinked at the speaker in unconcealed dismay.

It was Dr. Holmes, the headmaster of St. Jim's.

"Really, Mr. Ratcliff!" said Dr. Holmes.

"Sus-sus-sir!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff.

"I can hardly credit the evidence of my own eyes!" exclaimed the Head, his expression quite portentous. "It is—can it be possible that you were about to assault this junior with your walking-stick, Mr. Ratcliff?"

Mr. Ratcliff gulped.

"N-n-not at all, my dear sir. Nothing of the kind, I assure you!"

"I am pleased indeed to hear you say so, Mr. Ratcliff. Undoubtedly your actions were of a kind to leave any spectator with that impression. I have been watching you for several minutes, sir."

Mr. Ratcliff's face worked spasmodically.

The Head nodded.

"I happened to come out of the School House building when some mischance led to your falling down near three juniors who are no longer here. I regret, Mr. Ratcliff, that I cannot approve of your actions after that unfortunate accident."

"I—I——" stuttered Mr. Ratcliff, licking his dry lips.

"I do not pretend to understand precisely what was going on," continued Dr. Holmes icily. "But whatever the circumstances, my dear sir, your action in pursuing juniors with a walking-stick was one at which I can only express very great surprise and displeasure."

Evidently the Head felt very deeply about the matter—so deeply, that he had temporarily forgotten the presence of Skimpole, who was blinking from headmaster to Housemaster with great solemnity.

Mr. Ratcliff seemed torn by all sorts of conflicting emotions. He glared at Skimpole almost wolfishly, then looked back at the Head.

"I—I—the fact is, Dr. Holmes——" he choked.

"I shall be interested to hear any explanations which will enable me to see the matter in another light!"

"The fact is—the fact is, sir——"

"Mr. Ratcliff!"

"The fact is, I was a little hasty!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff. "I confess, sir, I really must admit, that momentarily I lost control of myself."

"That, Mr. Ratcliff, is a matter for regret."

Mr. Ratcliff gulped.

"I—I am forced to agree, sir, that it is. You must nevertheless understand, sir, that the circumstances were, in their nature, very provoking——"

"But the fact remains, my dear sir, that you lost your temper," said Dr. Holmes coldly. "Again, I can only express my displeasure. You compel me to remark, Mr. Ratcliff, that this is not the first occasion on which I have observed that phenomenon."

"Dr. Holmes!"

"In fact, if I may say so without great offence, your temper has, on more than one occasion recently, led to results which I can only describe as unfortunate," said the Head, with asperity. "I must express the earnest hope, Mr. Ratcliff, that you will, at an early date, take steps

to guard against a repetition of such unfortunate incidents as this."

"Sue-sus-sir!" choked the Housemaster, his face almost green.

"Your position in the school is one of very great responsibility, my dear sir. If you continue to allow to exist a state of affairs in which your temper persists in overwhelming your reason, I shall very reluctantly be forced to the conclusion that you do not quite appreciate the responsibility rests with you."

"D-D-Doctor Holmes!" stuttered Mr. Ratcliff.

"It grieves me sincerely to have to speak to you in this manner, Mr. Ratcliff," said the Head, his face resuming for a moment its customary kindly expression. "I feel sure you will understand how disturbing the whole matter is, and how essential it becomes for you to make sure that the danger of my having to speak to you thus does not arise in the future."

"Ah—ah—exactly!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff, looking as though the entire universe was collapsing over his shoulders. "I assure you, dear sir, that your advice will receive my most earnest consideration."

"I feel sure it will, Mr. Ratcliff."

"Perhaps my temper is not always all that it should be," almost groaned Mr. Ratcliff. "I am possibly inclined to take matters connected with school discipline a little too seriously—"

"It is not my wish that you take matters too seriously!"

"I ought to mention, in justice to myself, that my health troubles me at times—"

"That, my dear Mr. Ratcliff, is a matter for your physician. I am sure, whatever the state of your health, that you see the necessity for acting with more calmness?"

"Quite, quite!" muttered the wretched Housemaster. "You may confidently rely on my doing so henceforth."

"It is pleasant for me to hear you say so, sir. Good-day!"

And Dr. Holmes, still a little ruffled, stalked off.

Mr. Ratcliff and Skimpole stared after his retreating figure.

Then Skimpole blinked at Mr. Ratcliff, and Mr. Ratcliff glared at Skimpole.

"M-m-may I go now, sir?" asked Skimpole.

Mr. Ratcliff choked.

"You—you may," he managed to say eventually.

And Skimpole went.

Mr. Ratcliff continued to stand on the same spot for a few seconds.

What passed through his mind during those few seconds will for ever be a matter for conjecture. Whatever it was, it could not have been very pleasant.

Suddenly, Mr. Ratcliff started.

His eyes, during the brief period of rumination, had been fixed on the newspaper which Skimpole had dropped in the collision, and now abandoned.

The newspaper in question was the current number of

the "Rylcombe Gazette," a local journal devoted mostly to farming interests. There were a number of displayed advertisements on the page which Skimpole had evidently been reading, and one of them had suddenly penetrated Mr. Ratcliff's consciousness.

By the strangest possible coincidence, Mr. Ratcliff found himself staring at the letters "B-A-D T-E-M-P-E-R-E."

He bent down and snatched up the paper, and avidly read the advertisement which so strangely concerned itself with bad tempers.

This is what he read:

"BAD TEMPERED?"

Always Grumbling? Perpetually Depressed?
Then What You Need Is



A wild, agonised duet went up as Mr. Ratcliff and Skimpole sat down on the gravel with a dreadful bump!

MIX'S 'NEVERMOAN' MIXTURE!

Feel The Joy Of Living Again!
Become An Inspiration To Yourself And Others. Make Life One Grand Sweet Song By Taking A Dose Of 'NEVERMOAN'!

I. MIX. Herbalist and General Merchant, Rylcombe.

Mr. Ratcliff read that advertisement, and re-read it. Then, with a sudden, quick movement he folded up the newspaper, and transferred it to his pocket. Immediately afterwards he was walking in the wake of Skimpole, and rapidly overhauling him.

The genius of the Shell suddenly felt a restraining hand laid on his shoulder. His jaw dropped as he turned round to recognise Mr. Ratcliff again.

"Ow!" he gasped.

Mr. Ratcliff twisted his face somehow into a smile. "One moment, Skimpole. Are you very busy during the next half-hour?"

"N-n-not at all, my dear sir," stuttered Skimpole.

"Excellent! I wish you to go to Rylcombe for me—on an errand which I shall expect you to treat as a matter of confidence."

"Really, I shall be very glad to assist you, my dear Mr. Ratcliff," said Skimpole solemnly.

And so the genius of the Shell became the medium through which Mr. Ratcliff was possibly going to transform himself and make his life, in the optimistic words of the advertisement, "one grand sweet song!"

CHAPTER 3. The Tonic!

"**D**EAR me! One of our old friends from St. Jim's!" Gordon Gay, the leader of the juniors at Rylcombe Grammar School, sounded quite genial. Frank Monk, Wootton, Carboy, and Oliver, who were with him, grinned with equal geniality as Herbert Skimpole came trotting down the lane half-way between St. Jim's and Rylcombe.

It didn't follow, of course, that they were going to continue to be genial. Skimpole evidently had doubts on that point, for he halted.

Gordon Gay & Co. jumped off the stile on which they had been sunning themselves, and surrounded the genius of the Shell affectionately.

"Don't turn back, old scout!" begged Gordon Gay. "Not often we have the chance of inspecting a St. Jim's microbe at close range. Have a good look at it, chaps. Don't get too near, in case it bites. What's its name, I wonder?"

"Pimple, I believe," said Frank Monk.

"Always thought it was Gumboil, or something like that," grinned Carboy. "Come to think of it, though, it's Skimpole."

"Skimpole! Ye gods!"

"Sounds more like the answer to a crossword puzzle," remarked Gordon Gay. "Well, anyway, Skimpole—"

"What is it, my good youth?" asked Skimpole, inwardly wondering why Fate had chosen to throw him so much in the wars on this bright May afternoon.

"Feel like being dribbled back to that mouldering old home for defectives you call St. Jim's?" asked Gordon Gay amiably.

"I— Ah! Really, my dear fellow, I assure you I have no desire whatever to undergo that experience."

"That's a pity!"

"Great pity," grinned Frank Monk, shaking his head.

"You see, old bean, you're going to be dribbled back to St. Jim's, whether you feel like it or not," explained Gordon Gay. "Roll him over, you men!"

"Oh, rather!"

Skimpole let out a gasp of protest.

"Pray desist! Let me alone, I beg of you! Yooop!"

The last observation was the result of Carboy's lifting Skimpole by the scruff of his neck and the seat of his trousers and depositing him gently, but firmly, on the dusty surface of the road.

"Keep still for a minute till we kick off, Skimmy," grinned Carboy. "Must give us a fair start, you know, even if you get up after."

"Groogh! My good youth—"

"Off we go!" yelled Gordon Gay suddenly. "Down with St. Jim's!"

"Hurrah!"

Gordon Gay set the human ball rolling with a movement of his foot, and Skimpole let out a howl. That howl must have been inspired by fright more than by pain, for the leader of the Grammarians had been as gentle as the peculiar circumstances permitted.

"Yaroooop!"

"On the ball!"

"Pass out to the wing!" chortled Wootton.

"Coming over!"

"Whoop! My good youths! Yooop!"

Yelling with laughter Gordon Gay & Co. dribbled Skimpole along the dusty lane.

Anybody but Skimpole would have recognised that it was just a high-spirited "rag," with no malice behind it. The Grammarians just rolled the St. Jim's junior over and over with their feet, causing him the maximum of inconvenience but the minimum of pain.

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But Skimpole took everything seriously, and his fright was quite real.

"Lemme alone! Whooop! You are causing me great suffering and mental agony. Yooop! I declare that I have never— Yow-wow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Whether Gordon Gay, given the chance, would actually have carried out his plan to dribble Skimpole right up to the gates of St. Jim's was extremely doubtful.

As it happened, he wasn't given the chance.

Skimpole's journey along the lane at the feet of the grinning Grammarians had lasted no more than ten seconds when there was a yell from a crowd of juniors who had suddenly appeared from the direction of St. Jim's.

"Grammar School cads!"

"What the thump—" exclaimed Tom Merry, junior captain of St. Jim's, who was at the head of the newcomers.

"My hat, Skimmy!" yelled Clifton Dane, another of the crowd. "And those bounders are ragging him! Pile in!"

The St. Jim's juniors needed no urging. They were already piling in. Almost before the Grammar School juniors realised what was happening, Tom Merry and half a dozen others belonging to the St. Jim's Shell were upon them.

Gordon Gay & Co.'s smiles suddenly changed to frowns, and their roars of laughter to roars of pain.

"Mop up the floor with the cheeky blighters!" panted Tom Merry.

"What-ho!"

"Back up, Grammar School!" roared Gordon Gay.

But the effect of that stirring rallying cry was rather spilt when the leader of the Grammarians finished up with a fiendish yell as he collapsed beneath the weight of a couple of St. Jim's men. And, anyway, the Grammar School juniors were not given much chance to back up, with odds of nearly two to one against them.

Tom Merry & Co. continued to pile in with a right good will. And very quickly the Grammar School contingent had almost disappeared from sight under their triumphant rivals.

Skimpole of the Shell, having adjusted his spectacles, and felt himself in various parts to make sure that he was still whole, staggered a little dizzily to his feet again.

"Ow! Dear me! How dreadful!" he gasped. "Really, those rough youths have had quite a disturbing effect on me! Ow!"

"Good old Skimmy!" grinned Noble, of the Shell. "Why didn't you turn round and scrap it out with 'em?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The idea of Skimpole turning round and scrapping it out with four hefty Grammarians struck those who were free to listen as funny. They roared.

Skimpole blinked at them with great solemnity.

"Really, my good fellows, I see nothing whatever to laugh at. In point of fact, it did not occur to me to enter into a contest of fisticuffs with these youths. Even had it done so, I fear that my prowess at boxing is not sufficiently great to warrant any optimism as to the result!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I assure you it is no laughing matter. These rough youths have given me considerable pain and—"

"Look out, Skimmy!" yelled Monty Lowther suddenly. "They're after you again!"

"Yaroooop!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A yell of laughter went up from the St. Jim's fellows. For Herbert Skimpole, without waiting to confirm the truth of the humorous Monty's statement, had turned tail and fled, his lean face the picture of dismay.

Gordon Gay & Co., as a matter of fact, were not in a position to chase Skimpole just then, all five of them being on the ground in various attitudes of repose with triumphant St. Jim's men sitting on their chests.

Skimpole was not quite sure about that, and by way of precaution he continued his interrupted journey to Rylcombe at the double, not pausing once until he reached the old High Street of the village.

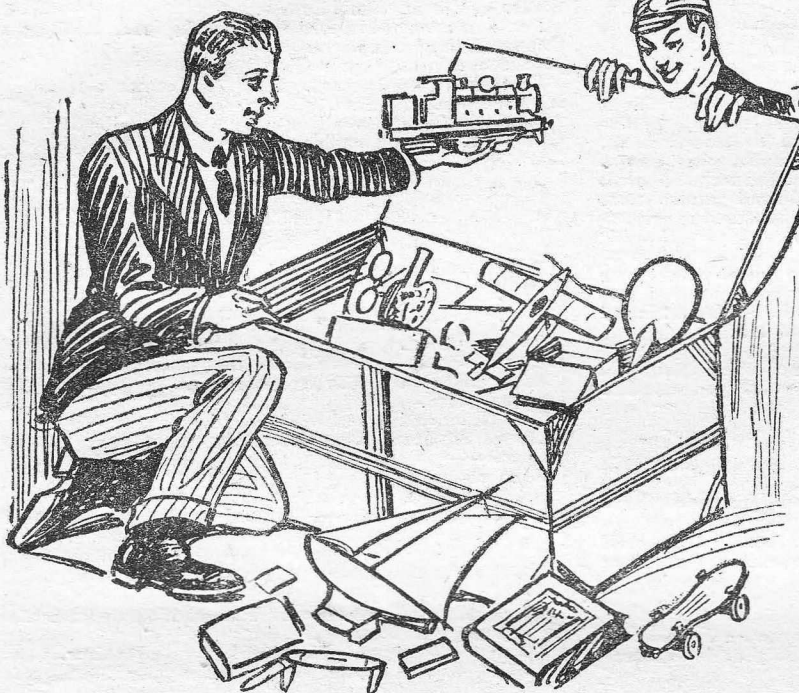
Then only did he slacken speed and mop his perspiring

(Continued on page 8.)

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The "GEM" TREASURE CHEST



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There is nothing to solve in the way of puzzle-pictures, nothing to do, in fact, but to send in your name and address. There! What could be more simple?

Included in the list of presents that I am GIVING AWAY to registered readers are Bowman Engines, models of Kaye Don's "Silver Bullet," Schneider Sea Planes, Cobham Aeroplanes, Army Tanks, Fountain Pens, Spring-heel Jack Novelties, Railway Sets, Roller Skates, Boxing Gloves, Marx Tractors, Printing Outfits, Novelty Pencils, Mathematical Sets, etc., etc.

These are only a few—there are many others—and they're for you! This is what you have to do. Sign your name and address on the Registration form provided below, and send it to "GEM GIFT SCHEME," 5, Carmelite Street, London, E.C.4. Then watch this page every week to see if your name appears. If your name is published in this week's list below you simply fill in the special "CLAIM" FORM which you will find on page 16 of this issue, and send it to GEM "GIFT" CLAIM, 5, Carmelite Street, London, E.C.4. That done, you simply sit tight, for the GIFT will be dispatched to you without any delay.

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Skimpole The Super-Man!

(Continued from page 6.)

brow ere turning his footsteps in the direction of Mr. Mix's shop.

Mr. Mix's shop was a familiar landmark in Rylcombe, if only by reason of the peculiar assortment of goods he displayed in the window. As mentioned in his advertisement, Mr. Mix, in addition to being a herbalist, was also a general merchant. His general merchandise included goods as widely diversified as saddlery, second-hand gramophones, fishing-tackle, cattle foods, and patent preparations for improving the health of dogs and horses.

Skimpole entered the shop.

Mr. Mix, a somewhat seedy-looking gentleman, came forward and bestowed on his customer an abstracted sort of nod. Mr. Mix was known to be a little absent-minded and usually had an abstracted air about him.

"Good-afternoon, young gentleman!"

"Good-afternoon my dear sir!" responded Skimpole gravely. "I have reason to believe that you retail a preparation known as 'Nevermoan'?"

"That is so, sir."

"I will take a bottle, if I may. What is the price?"

"Half-a-crown sir, and worth its weight in gold. Will you take half a dozen?"

"Dear me no! One will do very well just now, thank you."

Mr. Mix abstractedly reached for a bottle on the shelf behind the counter and handed it over, without troubling to wrap it up.

"Nothing else just now, sir?" he inquired.

"I think not, my good sir. One moment—"

Skimpole paused, his eyes fixed on a notice hanging up at the back of the shop. He started slightly as he read that notice.

"NERVOUSNESS AND TIMIDITY OVERCOME!"

"Mix's Special No. 1 Tonic for those who are nervous and timid, never fails! Try a bottle to-day and be as brave as a lion!"

"Something else?" persisted Mr. Mix.

"Dear me! I was just wondering—"

"Nice fishing-rod, or a hundredweight of cattle food?" suggested Mr. Mix.

"Not to-day, thank you. I was thinking of your Special No. 1 Tonic," confessed Skimpole.

"Wonderful stuff, sir," said Mr. Mix. "Thousands of delighted customers. Acts like magic and contains no drugs. Half-a-crown a bottle."

"I am almost inclined—in fact, I will!" said Skimpole, with sudden resolution. "Pray give me a bottle, my dear sir."

"Certainly."

And Mr. Mix handed over a second bottle.

Skimpole, after settling for his purchases, quitted the shop.

Outside in the village street, he paused and eyed his second bargain with a ruminating eye.

"Dear me! I wonder—" he murmured.

Skimpole was not often given to considering his imperfections. But his recent encounter with the Grammarians had stirred up within the Shell genius some latent dissatisfaction. The sight of that notice in Mr. Mix's shop had given him a momentary glimpse of the advantages of being as brave as a lion.

After a cautious look round, to make sure that he was not observed, Skimpole uncorked the bottle and put it to his lips.

He choked for a moment. For a herbal mixture, the preparation seemed to be peculiarly strong. But with an effort he managed to swallow a little of the stuff.

Then blinking solemnly, he replaced the bottle in his pocket side by side with the Mr. Ratcliff's "Nevermoan," and started back for St. Jim's.

A peculiar sense of elation seemed to take possession of Skimpole on the return journey. For a time, he couldn't quite make out what was the cause of it.

Then—

Skimpole suddenly became aware that a yell had gone up a little way down the lane.

He came round the bend and immediately saw the cause of it.

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Gordon Gay & Co., having apparently been released by Tom Merry and his chums, were once more on the war-path. A desperate struggle was taking place at the side of the road between the Grammarians and someone whom they were trying to make their prisoner.

Skimpole recognised that "someone." It was Jack Blake, of the St. Jim's Fourth.

For a moment Skimpole stood in the lane, blinking at the struggling group.

Then a miracle happened.

He took a step forward. That step became a run. The run became a wild rush.

Skimpole found himself uttering a fierce yell. And with that fierce yell still on his lips, he flung himself into the fray!

CHAPTER 4.

Miracles!

"WHAT the thump—"
 "What the merry dickens—"
 "Yooooop!"
 "Whooop!"

Gordon Gay felt a bony fist collide violently with his ear. Frank Monk experienced the sensation of a mule kicking his chin. Carboy roared as he felt his nose punched—hard.

The Grammarians wheeled round, expecting to see a horde of St. Jim's men surrounding them. And all they saw was—

Skimpole!

Gordon Gay & Co. blinked.

"W-w-what on earth—" gasped Gordon Gay.

"Come on my good fellows!" roared Skimpole, brandishing his fists. "I am sorry to have to give you pain, but I absolutely insist on engaging you all in a bout of fist-cuffs!"

"G-g-great pip! Whooop!" finished Wootton, as a bony fist crashed into him.

"It's—it's Skimpole! Yaroooooh!" yelled Oliver.

"Mad!" roared Gordon Gay. "He's potty!"

"Oh, my hst! Yooooop!"

"Keepimoff! He's as mad as a hatter!"

That was the first impression of the Grammarians. And really, there was every excuse for their thinking so. For the fellow who had run from them like the wind only half an hour before to be wading in like this could mean only one thing.

Skimpole had gone mad!

That was what the Grammarians thought, and the dreadful suspicion caused them to back away from him rather hastily.

Jack Blake, his danger past for the time being, stared at Skimpole as dazedly as the Grammarians.

"S-S-Skimmy!" he stuttered. "What the thump—"

"Have no fear, my dear Blake! I shall very quickly vanquish these youths!" shouted Skimpole reassuringly.

"Come on, my good fellows!"

"Ow! Keep away, you loony!"

"Take that, my good youth!"

"Yarooooop!"

"And here is one for you, my dear fellow!"

"Yooooop! Gerroff!"

"Mad!" yelled Carboy. "Raving mad! I'm not scrapping with a madman, anyway. I'm off!"

"Ow! Same here!"

And the rest of the Grammarians seemed to be in accord with Carboy's sentiment. Without waiting to sample any more of Skimpole's ferocious blows or to inquire further into the state of his mind, Gordon Gay & Co. turned tail and fled.

Skimpole seemed inclined, for a moment, to follow them. But on second thoughts, he decided not to do so. Instead, he dropped his bony arms and turned to the half-paralysed Blake.

"You are not seriously hurt, I trust, my good youth?" he inquired anxiously.

"M-m-my hat!" was Blake's only reply to that kind inquiry.

"I am sorry that I did not arrive on the scene early enough to prevent their attack altogether, my dear Blake. Fortunately I arrived in time to render you the assistance you needed."

"Kik-kik-crikey!" stuttered Blake, staring at Skimpole like one in a dream.

"If you are feeling sufficiently recovered from the effects of the bout, my good youth, we will return to the School!"

"But—but what does it mean?" yelled Blake.

"I fail to comprehend your meaning, my dear Blake."

"What made you do it?" demanded Blake. "The way

you waded into those Grammar School chaps was—was gorgeous! How did you manage it?"

Skimpole pondered for a moment. Really, now the question was put to him point-blank, he found it hard to explain even to his own satisfaction just how he had managed it.

He had a very clear recollection that on the occasion of his previous encounter with the Grammarians, less than an hour before, he had felt decidedly funky. Yet this time it had seemed a positive joy to rush in and hit out right and left at the same fellows whom he had previously fuked.

Temporarily, Skimpole had forgotten his interview with Mr. Mix. But as he pondered, he suddenly remembered.

"Dear me! It—it must be the tonic!" he exclaimed.

"Eh?"

"Nothing, my good fellow!" said Skimpole, with a calmness and self-assurance utterly foreign to the Skimpole of

"My hat! If it isn't Skimmy again!" exclaimed Figgins. "Coming right into the blessed lions' den, by gum!" grimmed Fatty Wynn. "What's the game, Skimmy?" "Looking for trouble again, old bean?" asked Kerr, with a smile.

Skimpole stopped and blinked at the heroes of the New House.

"Ah! I am glad I have encountered you fellows," he remarked. "Earlier in the afternoon, you endeavoured to subject me to physical violence."

"Never!"

"That was my understanding of the incident, anyhow," said Skimpole, with dignity. "Let me now take this opportunity of informing you that for the future I intend to be treated with proper respect!"

"Eh?" yelled Figgins & Co. in astonished chorus.

"Perhaps it will be as well if I emphasise my determination to be treated properly with an argument suited to



Thwack! Thwack! Thwack! Skimpole started to wield the ashplant on Kildare himself!

an hour since. "I had merely remembered a trivial circumstance of no importance whatever. Come! We will return!"

And the genius of the Shell, his massive head held high and a strange light in his watery eyes, led the way to St. Jim's.

Jack Blake followed, almost speechless with amazement. In the quad they parted, Blake wandering dizzily to the School House and Skimpole making tracks for the New House.

There was something jaunty in Skimpole's step as he entered New House territory. One or two New House juniors who were about noticed it and stared.

"Something happened to that School House worm?" asked Redfern.

"Looks different certainly!" remarked Lawrence. "Call him over. Hi, you, Skimpole!"

Skimpole marched on regardless, leaving Redfern and Lawrence staring after him with puzzlement in their eyes.

The genius of the Shell tramped up the steps of the New House building and stalked into the hall.

Three juniors who were standing near the door regarded him curiously as he entered.

your inferior intellects," said Skimpole. "It is a recognised scientific fact that to intellects unfitted for logical argument force provides an excellent substitute. I therefore propose to knock your heads together!"

"You—you propose to whatter?" stuttered Figgins.

"To—to knock our heads—whoop!" concluded Fatty Wynn, as his bullet head came into violent contact with Kerr's prominent forehead.

"Yoooop!" yelled Kerr simultaneously.

Figgins stood by, rooted to the floor in sheer amazement.

"What—what—yarooooogh!" he finished, as a bony hand grasped him by the neck and brought him into painful collision with Kerr.

"I trust, my good youths, that that argument will appeal to you!" said Skimpole severely.

And with that, he stalked off, leaving Figgins & Co. in a state bordering on stupor.

Walking briskly, Skimpole next made for Mr. Ratcliff's study and rapped sharply on the door.

"Come in!" called out Mr. Ratcliff's acid voice from within.

Skimpole entered and nodded coolly to the Housemaster, who was seated at his desk working.

"Good-evening, Mr Ratcliff!"

"Ah, Skimpole! You have brought me the medicine?"

"I have."

And Skimpole said it as though he meant it. Mr. Ratcliff looked up rather sharply.

"Very well, Skimpole. Was the money I gave you sufficient to cover the cost?"

"Just sufficient. Here is the mixture."

"Thank you, Skimpole. You may go."

Skimpole blinked at Mr. Ratcliff through his big spectacles, and there was a slightly sinister look in his eyes.

"I am not quite ready to go yet, sir," he said, very firmly and very distinctly.

Mr. Ratcliff adjusted his glasses and stared.

"You are not quite ready to go? I am afraid I do not understand you, Skimpole."

"Perhaps I had better make the matter more clear to you, my dear Mr. Ratcliff. The fact is—"

"Well?" barked Mr. Ratcliff, as Skimpole groped for words.

"The fact is that before I go, I feel impelled to tell you precisely what I think of you," said Skimpole.

Mr. Ratcliff jumped.

"What—what—"

"I fear that hitherto I have not been quite so frank with you as I might have been—"

"F-f-frank?" stuttered Mr. Ratcliff incredulously.

"I should perhaps have taken the opportunity of giving you a few home truths when I saw you in the quad this afternoon, my dear sir. As I did not do so then, I will do so now."

"Boy!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff, his hair almost standing on end.

"The fact is, Mr. Ratcliff, that you are a mean, spiteful, bad-tempered, and somewhat unprincipled man—"

"BOY!" shrieked Mr. Ratcliff.

"Totally lacking in any ideas of justice and good sportsmanship—"

"B-B-BOY!"

"And altogether unsuited in temperament to take charge of the innocent and impressionable youths over whom you hold sway," said Skimpole whose surprising change of character had evidently not affected his fondness for polysyllabic words. "In addition to all that, sir, you are a humbug!"

"What!"

"I think that that is all I have to say to you at present, my dear sir," concluded Skimpole gravely. "I will therefore bid you good-day!"

With a curt nod, Skimpole then took his departure.

Mr. Ratcliff watched him go out in dumb, horrified amazement. He was too overcome to make a move to stop the slanderous genius of the Shell. All he could do for the time being was blink.

The slam of the study door after the retreating Skimpole brought him back to consciousness again.

Uttering a strangled, inarticulate cry, the outraged Housemaster leaped to his feet and reached out for a cane.

He flung himself half-way across the room to the door.

Then he paused.

Even in the heat of his anger Mr. Ratcliff still remembered that dreadful interview with the Head earlier in the afternoon. The remembrance was just strong enough to make him hesitate.

He was almost dancing with rage. But he still had sufficient common sense left to realise that that very fact made it all the more important that he should not act without first thinking. The bare possibility of the Head discovering him in a raging temper for the second time that day made Ratty shudder.

His eye fell on the bottle of medicine which Skimpole had deposited on the desk. The bottle was without a label, but if Skimpole had carried out his instructions it would most certainly contain the celebrated "Nevermoan" mixture, with which Mr. Mix alleged bad temper could be cured like magic.

Mr. Ratcliff snatched at the bottle, savagely uncorked it, and then imbibed.

Like Skimpole's mixture, "Nevermoan" was peculiarly strong for a presumably innocuous herbal preparation. Mr. Ratcliff gasped and spluttered over his dose, and his face changed from a kind of mottled green to a mottled red.

He replaced the bottle on his desk, and took another step towards the door. Then a sudden, peculiar change came over him.

Mr. Ratcliff halted; after a moment he turned back.

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He felt an extraordinarily pleasant glow pervading him. Somehow the importance of Skimpole's offence seemed to be diminishing. In fact, it soon seemed of no importance whatever.

Mr. Ratcliff's lean face began to alter in expression. The scowling lines grew less pronounced. A good-natured twist came to his lips. His little eyes began to twinkle.

Suddenly a beatific smile appeared on the Housemaster's face. He tried to suppress it, but it obstinately refused to be suppressed.

"Dear me!" said Mr. Ratcliff.

Then he chuckled.

Finally he laughed—laughed until tears of merriment were streaming down his furrowed cheeks.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Mr. Ratcliff.

CHAPTER 5.

Staggering!

"NEVER!"

"Fact!"

"Impossible, old chap! You're dreaming!" said Tom Merry.

"Probably what I should say if I were in your place," admitted Jack Blake of the Fourth. "But I happened to see it with my own eyes; and seeing's believing!"

"Takes a lot of believing, anyway!" grinned Clifton Dane, and there was a chorus of "Hear, hears!" from the crowd that had gathered round Blake.

It was after prep, and Blake had just been telling the story of Skimpole and the Grammarians to all and sundry in the Junior Common-room.

That story had been greeted with scepticism. The juniors simply couldn't believe it of Skimpole. Blake, who had seen for himself, had to agree with Dane that it took a lot of believing.

"Why, it was only half an hour before the time you're speaking of that Skimmy shot along the road like greased lightning because I told him the Grammar School chaps were after him again," said Lowther. "Own up, Blake, old man; you're leg-pulling!"

"Not a bit of it! I'm dead serious!"

"Dashed if I see the joke, anyway!" said Tom Merry.

"Hallo! Here's Skimmy himself! We'll tackle him about it!"

Herbert Skimpole, who had just strolled into the Common-room, blinked solemnly at Tom.

"Did I hear you mention my name, Merry?"

"You did, old bean! Come over and explain. We want to know all about it!"

"See the conquering hero comes!" sang Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Skimpole crossed the Common-room, and even the least observant among the crowd couldn't help noticing the striking change in his bearing since afternoon classes.

Usually the Shell genius walked with a pronounced stoop, his eyes dreamy, and a far-away look in his face. But now his head was held well back, his eyes were gleaming behind his big spectacles, and an alert, determined expression was on his face. His lower jaw seemed almost to protrude, as though he had suddenly developed most pugnacious instincts.

This was a new Skimmy altogether; there was no mistake about it. The juniors stared at him and marvelled.

"Well, my dear Merry," said Skimpole, kindly but firmly.

"My hat!" was all Tom Merry could say for a moment.

"What is it you wish explained, my good youth?"

"Great pip! What ever has happened to you, Skimmy?" gasped the leader of the St. Jim's juniors. "You're all different!"

"I was not aware of the circumstance, Merry. I will concede to you that there is a slight change in my attitude—"

"Slight change! I should call it a complete transformation, myself!" remarked Tom Merry. "But what's the cause of it all, old bean? What's come over you?"

"Blessed if I don't believe Blake's yarn now!" said Manners. "But how the thump—"

Skimpole allowed a slight smile to cross his solemn physiognomy.

"It would appear that there is some mystification on your part as to the reason for my changed attitude, my good youths," he remarked. "As to that, there are certain facts which I intend to keep to myself."

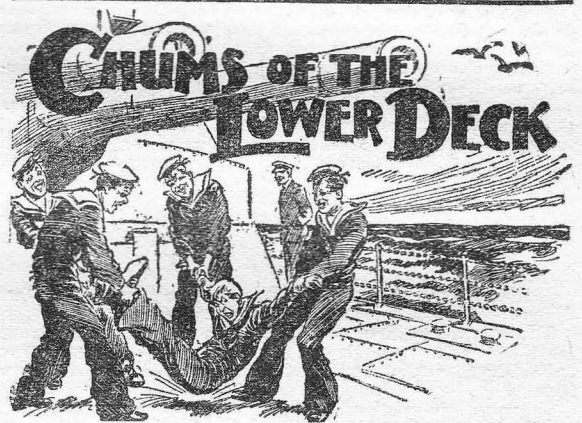
"There are, are there?"

Skimpole nodded.

"I am perfectly willing, however, to tell you that, for certain reasons, my behaviour henceforth will be very different from the behaviour which has hitherto been characteristic of me."

"What ever that may mean!" chimed in Blake.
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 Skimpole frowned.
 "Pray be silent while I am talking, my good youths, or I shall feel it incumbent on me to thrash one or two of you as a warning to the rest!"
 "Wha-a-at?" came a yell from the crowd.
 "And pray refrain from shouting. Vulgar shouting is repugnant to me," said Skimpole.
 "M-m-my hat!"
 "To proceed. From now on I intend to take a very prominent part in all matters concerned with the Lower School. I shall insist on a place in the junior cricket team, and—"
 "Insist!" murmured Tom Merry dazedly. "Ye gods!"
 "I shall go in for boxing, and very quickly become champion of the Lower School—possibly of the entire school!" said Skimpole calmly. "I shall, furthermore, exercise far more authority in school politics than I have done in the past—"
 "Oh, my giddy aunt!"
 "In brief," concluded Skimpole, with a wave of his bony hand, "I intend to assume my natural place as the most important juvenile in the Lower School at St. Jim's!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 The juniors yelled. They were astonished; but they were also tickled. The whole thing was amazing and inexplicable; but it was even more funny. The entire Common-room shrieked.
 Skimpole blinked at the hilarious crowd.
 "My good youths—"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "You appear to see something of a humorous nature—"
 "We do; excuse us!" almost wept Monty Lowther.
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "But I assure you that I am perfectly serious. As you appear to doubt my word, I am afraid there is only one step open to me," said Skimpole.
 "And what's that?"
 "To indulge in a bout of fisticuffs with the whole lot of you and thrash you!"
 "Help!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Mercy!" howled Gore. "Oh, my hat! As you are strong, so be merciful, Skimmy!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 Skimpole rolled back his cuffs with an air of great determination.
 "I am afraid it is too late to beg for mercy now. My mind is made up; I insist on thrashing you!"
 "But suppose we object— Yarooooo!" finished Noble of the Shell.
 And the juniors' yells of laughter changed to a yell of amazement as the Australian junior staggered back under a rattling blow to the jaw from Skimpole's bony fist.
 "Ye gods! He means it!" hooted Clifton Dane. "Look at him— Ow-wow!"
 "He's running amok— Whooop!" shouted Herries, as Skimpole's knuckles collided with his ear with such force as to make his head sing.
 In a few minutes the Junior Common-room was in a pandemonium.
 It was amazing—incredible! Skimpole was actually engaged in a serious "scrap" with half the Lower School at St. Jim's!
 And, strangely enough, he was doing exceedingly well. Several juniors were already lying on the floor in attitudes expressive of very great discomfort. Several more were holding damaged noses and injured ears which the genius of the Shell had somehow hit.
 "Stop him! We'll have the prefects up in a minute!" yelled Tom Merry.
 "Chap's potty—must be!" gasped Monty Lowther.
 "Mad as a March hare— Grooogh!"
 Skimpole had scored another "bull"!
 Such a riot as was now in progress could hardly have lasted long without attracting attention from the powers that were. In a matter of seconds the door of the Common-room was flung open, and Kildare of the Sixth looked in, his expression very wrathful.
 "Hold on, you young scamps!" roared Kildare, above the din. "How the thump do you expect me to hold a cricket meeting below with a pitched battle going on up here?"
 "Cave!" gasped Tom Merry.
 "Ease up! Kildare!"
 "Oh crikey!"
 The juniors suddenly became very subdued. Even Skimpole dropped his hands, though he glared at the inter-rupter in a way that made it quite clear that he, at any rate, was not subdued.
 Kildare eyed the crowd grimly.

"All gone mad?" he inquired.
 "Nunno!"
 "Not at all, Kildare, deah boy! If I might explain—"
 "Sorry, but I can't wait all night!" said Kildare gruffly.
 "Who's to blame?"
 No answer.
 "Right-ho, then! You can all take fifty lines; and there'll be trouble for some of you if I hear another sound!"
 "All serene, Kildare!"
 "One moment!"
 A very determined voice had spoken.
 All eyes were turned to Herbert Skimpole of the Shell.
 "Well, Skimpole?" said Kildare impatiently.
 "I regret, my good fellow, that I shall be unable to write an imposition for you, as you are suggesting," said Skimpole firmly.
 "Eh?"
 "I think you heard what I said, my dear Kildare!"
 "You—you won't be able to write the impot?" stuttered Kildare. "And why not, may I ask?"
 "For the simple reason, my good fellow, that I do not propose to write impots for prefects any longer!"
 "Oh, great pip!"
 The juniors stared at Skimpole breathlessly.
 Kildare looked dumbfounded.
 "You—you do not propose—well, my hat! Are you trying to be impudent, Skimpole?"
 Skimpole, after a brief moment of hesitation, nodded.
 "If you like to take it that way, my dear fellow—yes! For the future, I do not intend to recognise the authority of prefects— Yarooooo!"
 Skimpole's remarks ended up in a yell. Kildare, recovering possession of his faculties again, had taken swift action
 (Continued on next page.)



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He had brought up an ashplant with him; this he now proceeded to use on Skimpole's back.

"Poor old Skimmy!" murmured Jack Blake.

"Half a minute! What's the silly ass doing now?" asked Tom Merry. "Surely he's not—"

But he was!

Even as Tom Merry spoke, Skimpole had suddenly wriggled out of Kildare's grasp.

What happened next drew a gasp from everybody in the room. With a quick movement, Skimpole reached up and wrenched the ashplant from Kildare's hand.

Then—

As Monty Lowther expressed it afterwards, the shades of all the prefects that ever had been must have turned in their graves.

Skimpole started to wield the ashplant on Kildare himself!

Thwack, thwack, thwack!

"Ow!" yelled Kildare involuntarily.

Kildare's world must have collapsed in ruins about him at that moment. What was happening now was something which surely had never happened before in the entire history of St. Jim's.

A junior was caning a prefect—and caning him as though he meant it, too!

The spectators felt turned to stone.

"You—you—Ow! Are you mad? Ouch!" yelled Kildare.

Then, with a bound, he was upon the amazingly truculent Skimpole.

What might have happened to Skimpole if Rushden of the Sixth had not looked in just then hardly bore thinking about.

Fortunately, Rushden did look in.

"Kildare! What the merry dickens—"

And Rushden's voice brought Kildare back to the reason he had for a moment been in danger of losing. The captain of St. Jim's simply grabbed his ashplant and walked to the door, his face quite white.

"Report to me after prayers in the morning for an interview with Mr. Railton, Skimpole!" he managed to gasp.

Then he fled. Rushden, after a curious glance at the petrified crowd, followed him.

After that there was silence for quite a long time.

"Well, that beats Barney!" said Tom Merry, at last.

"My hat, yes!"

"How do you feel now, Skimmy?"

"A little ruffled after my encounter with Kildare, my dear Merry," replied Skimpole, quite calmly. "Otherwise I am quite well!"

"Ye gods!"

And that was about all there was to say in the matter. Skimpole's behaviour seemed beyond argument.

The crowd broke up. And for the rest of the evening most of the fellows, though giving many a curious look at Skimpole, preferred to keep a respectful distance from him.

Skimpole, in a miraculously short space of time, had become the "enfant terrible" of St. Jim's!

CHAPTER 6.

The Leopard Changes His Spots:

"RATTY wants you!"

Edgar Lawrence put his head round the door of Figgins' study that same evening, and made that announcement.

Figgins & Co. groaned in unison:

"All of us?"

Lawrence grinned.

"Fraid so! Better stuff some exercise-books down your bags before you go!"

"Did he look waxy?" asked Kerr.

"Well, no. Matter of fact, I couldn't quite make Ratty out. He seemed to be grinning like a Cheshire cat!"

"Worst sign of all!" grunted Figgins. "Means he's looking forward to making us sit up, I suppose. Well, we've been expecting it!"

"Wonder he's postponed it so long," remarked Fatty Wynn. "Shouldn't have been surprised if he'd sent for us as soon as we came in, considering the way we left him this afternoon."

"Better see him right away and get it over, anyway," said Kerr, rising. "Ready, Figgy?"

"Ready—ay, ready!" answered Figgins, with a grimace. "Kim on!"

"Soon be over!" remarked Lawrence consolingly; and he went his way, whistling, while Figgins & Co. made tracks for Mr. Ratcliff's study.

They had been expecting the summons all the evening.

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Knowing nothing of the Head's interview with Mr. Ratcliff after their hurried departure from the New House master in the quad, Figgins & Co. confidently anticipated that Ratty would take the earliest opportunity of making them "sit up" for their part in the affair.

Feeling far from cheerful, they went downstairs to Mr. Ratcliff's room.

Figgins tapped on the door, expecting in response Mr. Ratcliff's customary grim and forbidding "Come in!"

He was a little surprised when a cheerful voice, quite unlike Mr. Ratcliff's, called out:

"Enter, my dear boys!"

Figgins & Co. entered. As they did so, Mr. Ratcliff rose from his desk and, greatly to their astonishment, seemed to beam on them.

"You sent for us, sir!" said Figgins.

Mr. Ratcliff beamed again.

"Quite right, Figgins. Sit down, all of you, and make yourselves at home!"

Figgins & Co. jumped. It was the first time on record that any junior had been invited to sit down in Mr. Ratcliff's study. As to the making-themselves-at-home part of the programme, Figgins & Co. could only think at first that their ears had deceived them.

"You—you did say we were to sit down?" stammered Figgins.

"Of course I did, my dear boy! Choose the most comfortable chairs and behave just as you would in your own studies! Why shouldn't masters and boys fraternise occasionally?"

"F-f-raternise?"

Figgins and his chums blinked at Mr. Ratcliff, then blinked at each other. It was hard to believe that Mr. Ratcliff was deliberately "leading them up the garden!" and playing a practical joke at their expense. Yet what other explanation could there be of this strange phenomenon?

The juniors gingerly sat down on the edges of the least comfortable chairs in the room and waited.

"Possibly you wonder why I have sent for you, my dear boys," said Mr. Ratcliff, beaming from one to the other. "Let me first get through the most unpleasant part of the business."

"Oh!"

So there was going to be something unpleasant about it anyway! Figgins & Co. waited for Mr. Ratcliff to produce his cane.

But Mr. Ratcliff didn't produce a cane. Instead, he sat down again and regarded them affectionately.

"The fact is," he said deliberately. "I have an apology to make to you three boys!"

Figgins & Co. started violently.

"I—I beg your pardon, sir!" muttered Figgins.

"This afternoon, my dear boys, I acted very hastily towards you. I want to take this opportunity of expressing my very sincere regret for my shameful behaviour," said Mr. Ratcliff, still beaming.

The New House juniors began to wonder whether they were on their heads or their heels. The interview with Mr. Ratcliff was beginning to take on the aspect of a weird and wonderful dream.

"I—I say, sir, are you feeling quite well?" asked Fatty Wynn, rather anxiously.

"I am feeling in excellent health; never felt better in my life, in fact! Ha, ha!" concluded Mr. Ratcliff, breaking surprisingly into a laugh.

"M-my hat!"

"I trust, my dear lads, that you are going to accept my apology?"

Figgins drew a deep breath. It required a long stretch of the imagination to think that Mr. Ratcliff could be suffering from the effects of alcoholic refreshment, for Mr. Ratcliff, as was well known, did not approve of alcohol in any shape or form. Nevertheless, Figgins was being rapidly forced to that conclusion; and if it was the correct conclusion, then the only thing to do, from Figgins' point of view, was to give the inebriated gentleman his head.

"That's all right, sir!" he said soothingly. "We accept your apology; don't we, chaps?"

"Oh, rather!" gasped Kerr and Wynn.

"I am pleased; rather, perhaps, I should say I am delighted," said Mr. Ratcliff. "I must confess that I feel unworthy of such generous treatment. But I knew that you would act in a generous and forgiving manner."

"Quite, quite!" stuttered Figgins. "May we go now, sir?"

Mr. Ratcliff looked quite perturbed.

"Please do not go so soon, Figgins. I had looked forward to entertaining you until bed-time. As a matter of fact I sent down to the school tuckshop especially for a supply of jam-tarts—"

"Jam-tarts?" yelled Figgins and Kerr and Wynn, as one man.

Mr. Ratcliff chuckled a delighted chuckle.
 "Ha, ha! I thought that would please you, boys. But that's not all. I've also got in some chocolate eclairs and assorted toffees and ginger-beer and lemonade—"

Figgins and his chums looked at each other helplessly. What on earth could it all mean?

Whatever it meant, they couldn't possibly have felt displeased when Mr. Ratcliff proceeded to produce from a cupboard behind him stacks of Dame Taggles' luscious jam-tarts and other inviting-looking confections. Fatty Wynn's first look of amazement quickly gave way to a fat smile that spread till his rotund face was beaming like a full moon.

"I—I say, sir, this is awfully good of you!" he murmured.

"Certainly. Got some glasses for the ginger-beer, sir?" asked Kerr, recovering his sang-froid and inwardly determining to make the most of the extraordinary occasion.

Glasses were produced, ginger-beer corks popped merrily, and Mr. Ratcliff's study began to buzz with cheery conversation.

Figgins & Co. were quite willing to sit in Mr. Ratcliff's study and talk cricket for the rest of the evening. The Housemaster's ideas of the great summer game rather tickled the New House heroes. He got cricket and football inextricably mixed up, talking about the offside rule and l.b.w. difficulties in the same breath. Cricket, according to the ideas of Horace Ratcliff, M.A., was apparently a weird and wonderful game. But he showed willingness, anyway, and in the circumstances Figgins & Co. were able to overlook his fearsome lack of knowledge.

Half an hour passed very pleasantly in this way. At

Gather Round, Chaps!



NOTHING TO SOLVE!

There are two big reasons why our Grand Free Gift Scheme will prove an immense success. One is that it is not a competition, and therefore there are no puzzle pictures or problems to be solved. And the other is that the hundreds of presents that are being given away are very handsome articles.

Take, for instance, the Bowman Engines. Now what boy doesn't like a steam engine? Look at the hours of enjoyment you can get from it. And then the aeroplanes, topping models of the Schneider Sea-Plane and the Cobham Plane. I know there are precious few chaps who wouldn't like one of these.

In this Mechanical Age, working models of great engineering wonders are always popular—and I had that in view when I made up my list of FREE Gifts. In that list you will find some really attractive models.

Just for sending in your name and address, I don't think there's ever been a more simple way of securing a FREE GIFT of such value as is offered in the SCHEME outlined on page 7 of this issue.

IN A FORTNIGHT'S TIME!

For the last week or two I have been making some mention of NEW Features, that will be added to the programme of the GEM, without giving any details.

Now I think it time to let you know what these features will be.

In the first place there will be a New Series of Wild West Yarns, of a new and original type. There'll be all the thrills of prairie adventures in them, but what will strike you, and hold you, when you read them, will be the humorous characters that figure throughout the tales. Believe me, boys, you're in for a screamingly funny time.

The Wigga-Wagga Boys sounds good, and you're right!

These lads appear in a set of comic pictures which will send you into fits of laughter. Ha, ha, ha! I can't help laughing when I think of them. And you'll do the same when you see them.

Other new features will be included in the programme, and of these I shall speak in detail next week.

Don't think, because I haven't mentioned the long complete St. Jim's story that it's going to be cut out. Oh dear, no! You'll find that there as usual, but BETTER THAN EVER!

Lastly, our grand serial will find a big share in the make-up of the new programme.

A DEEP MYSTERY!

Bernard Glyn, the amazing inventor of St. Jim's, is the central figure in next week's extra-long complete tale of the Chums of St. Jim's. This story has all the ingredients of a thriller. It will grip you in every chapter; and if you're not breathless when you've finished it, then I'm a Dutchman!

Are you following the adventures of Chick Chance in our grand serial? If so, then look out for more thrills with this daring fellow and his two pals in next week's long instalment of "CHICK CHANCE—ADVENTURER!"

Our whiskery wonder's own special corner, "Ask The Oracle!" and another long list of Free Gift Winners will complete next Wednesday's very attractive issue. Don't miss it!

Cheerio,
 YOUR EDITOR.

Mr. Ratcliff shook his head.

"Not at all, Wynn. It is the very least I can do considering the way I treated you this afternoon. Pray help yourselves, and don't worry about the carpet; a few crumbs are easily cleared up!"

"G—great pip!"

"While you are disposing of the refreshments, my dear boys, we will talk about school matters in which we are all interested."

"Hem! You mean lessons, sir?" suggested Figgins.

"I mean nothing of the kind, Figgins. The very idea of schoolboys being interested in lessons after classes! Ha, ha, ha!" roared Mr. Ratcliff, with great heartiness.

Figgins closed one eye at his chums. As Mr. Ratcliff seemed to be amused it seemed to Figgins that the best course was for his guests to appear amused also. So Figgins laughed, and Kerr and Wynn, seeing what was required of them, joined in, too.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Figgins & Co., with great solemnity.

"I am glad—ha, ha!—that you appreciate the joke, my dear boys!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff. "Exceedingly funny, was it not?"

"Real scream, sir!" said Fatty Wynn. "Pass the tarts, Kerr, old man!"

the end of that period Figgins and Kerr felt that they had sampled quite enough of Dame Taggles' pastries to last them for several days, while even Fatty Wynn's celebrated appetite was beginning to show signs of waning.

"Help yourselves, my boys!" urged Mr. Ratcliff. "Plenty more, you know!"

"Fraid it can't be done, sir!" said Figgins. "Spirit's willing, but the flesh is weak!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Mr. Ratcliff, who seemed to find something funny in everything that was said.

And Figgins & Co. dutifully responded with an echoing roar.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, so much for the refreshments, then," said Mr. Ratcliff, wiping his eyes for at least the tenth time that evening. "If you're really sure—"

"Quite sure, sir, thank you!"

"Another tart for you, Wynn?"

Fatty Wynn, whose round face had grown shiny and contented, shook his head.

"Thanks very much, sir; but I really can't manage another crumb."

"Very well, then. And now," said Mr. Ratcliff, "what do you say, by way of a variation from talking about

cricket, if we shift back the furniture and have a game of tag?"

"T-t-tag?"

"It's a long time since I played the game, but I recollect that it is intensely amusing! Come, boys! Away with dull care, and back with the furniture!"

So saying, Mr. Ratcliff jumped up from his chair and started to push back his desk.

Figgins & Co., after a brief interval during which they wondered whether the world wasn't coming to an end, piled in and helped him. Chairs were heaped in a corner, the table was placed down on Mr. Ratcliff's desk, and very soon there was quite a large area available in the centre of the room.

Mr. Ratcliff rubbed his hands cheerfully.

"Excellent! A little game is precisely what we all need after that snack. I believe the idea is for the person called 'It' to chase the rest until he succeeds in touching another player, who then in his turn becomes 'It' and proceeds along the same lines. To begin the game, I propose that I shall be 'It' myself. Are you ready?"

"Oh, rather!" gasped Figgins.

"Ready for anything, sir!" choked Kerr.

"Then we're off!"

And Ratty started hopping about the room like a frog, flinging his arms about as though they were the sails of a windmill in his endeavours to touch one of the juniors and convert him to "It."

Round and round the room ran Figgins & Co.

After them came Mr. Ratcliff, his little eyes gleaming with excitement, and his lean face the picture of happiness.

"Go it, sir!" chortled Fatty Wynn.

"On the ball!"

Crash! Clatter! Bang!

Chairs and other oddments began to crash in all directions as the game progressed. One of the pictures fell and smashed. Ratty carried on regardless.

"Got you, Figgins!" he panted at last. "Now you're 'It'!"

"Oh crikey!"

"Chase the others now, my dear boy! Never mind the furniture!"

Figgins didn't mind it. He charged round the room in the wake of his two colleagues like the proverbial bull in a china shop.

Crash!

The table shot off the top of the desk, and two glasses smashed to atoms. Nobody minded, least of all Mr. Ratcliff, who was dancing about in high glee.

Figgins & Co. began to enter into the spirit of the thing. It was the first time they remembered being allowed to run loose in a master's study, and they made the most of their opportunity. Mr. Ratcliff's room soon resounded with yells and crashes.

The door suddenly opened. Baker, one of the New House prefects, had arrived to inquire into the cause of the disturbance.

Baker stared at the extraordinary scene in utter amazement.

"What the thump——" he gasped.

"Halt!" shouted Mr. Ratcliff suddenly. "It's a prefect, boys!"

"Oh!"

Figgins & Co., panting from their efforts, halted, wondering what difference the arrival of a prefect would make to Mr. Ratcliff's attitude.

They soon learned!

Suddenly Mr. Ratcliff burst into a roar of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha! Here's an idea, boys! You don't often get a chance to bump a prefect, do you?"

"Not exactly, sir!" grinned Figgins. "But——"

"Then bump Baker, my dear boys! You have my full permission to do so. In fact, I'll help you!"

"What—what——" stammered the astonished Baker.

"Look here, you young asses—— Yaroooooh!"

The chance was too good to be missed. Figgins & Co. bore Baker no grudge. They rather liked him, in fact. But Baker, after all, was a prefect, and Figgins & Co. felt that they ought, on principle, to take advantage of Mr. Ratcliff's generous offer.

Bump!

"Yoooooop!"

Three times was the raging prefect bumped; then three times more for luck.

"Now put him out in the passage!" ordered Mr. Ratcliff, and the juniors cheerfully carried out the order.

"My hat! Warm work!" remarked Figgins, as he returned.

Mr. Ratcliff chuckled.

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"Very warm, Figgins! Never mind! What does it matter so long as we're all happy?"

"Not a bit!"

"Exactly. But I'm afraid we must bring the entertainment to an end very shortly," said the amazing House-master reluctantly. "Leave the study as it is, boys. I will get one of the maids to tidy it up. And now, just to wind up, shall we join hands and sing 'Auld Lang Syne'?"

"Good egg!" grinned Figgins.

He had got beyond wondering at anything by this time!

So Figgins & Co. and Mr. Ratcliff joined hands and



with the hearty singing of Burns' stirring old anthem, came an end to the most amazing and entertaining evening the juniors had ever spent at St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 7.

Skimpole the Terrible!

ON the following morning, Herbert Skimpole woke up and blinked round him in the Shell dormitory with a feeling of great bravado.

"Who among you, my good youths, is willing to come over to the New House and rag our rivals?" asked Skimpole. "I am willing to lead you on the expedition!"

"Help!"

"Man's mad!" declared Lowther. "Take my tip, Skimpy, and keep away from the New House. Report to the sanny instead; what you need is a doctor!"

"Oh, rather!"

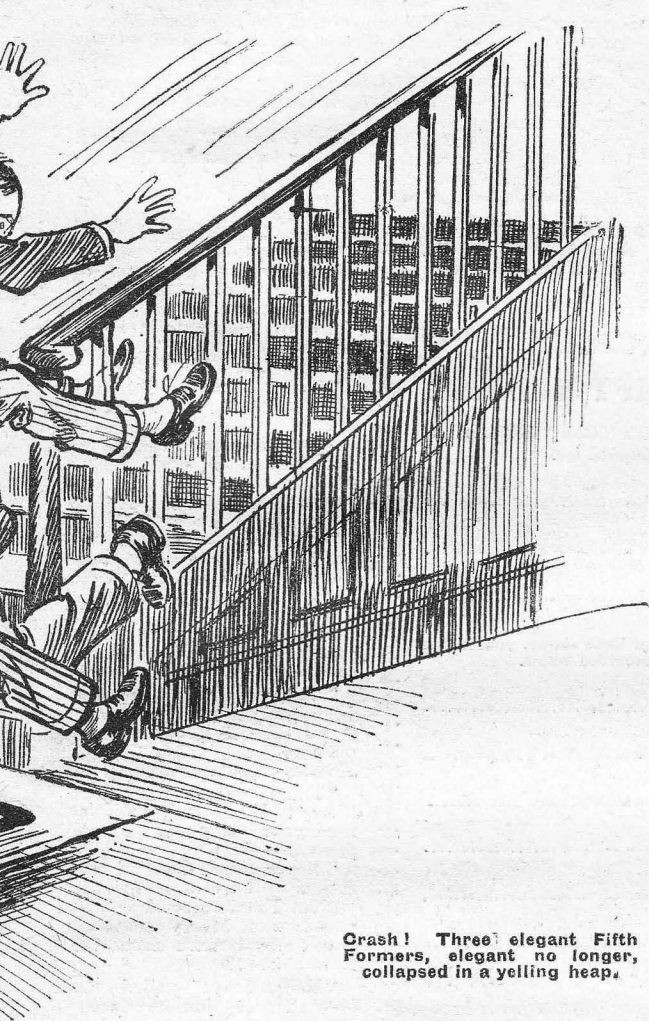
Skimpole blinked rather grimly at the candid Lowther.

"I am almost inclined, my good fellow, to take your remark as an affront and indulge in a bout of fisticuffs with you! But on second thoughts I will take a trip

downstairs and enjoy a brief period in the open air with a view to improving my appetite for breakfast. Good-bye!"

And Skimpole took a flying leap over another bed and tore out of the dormitory, leaving the Shell quite limp.

Skimpole was usually staid and leisurely in his progress downstairs in the morning, but not so now! Instead of progressing slowly and thoughtfully to the lower parts of the House, he elected on this occasion to take a route favoured by the younger and more vigorous of the School House juniors—namely, the banisters.



Crash! Three elegant Fifth Formers, elegant no longer, collapsed in a yelling heap.

The banisters were fairly safe as a means of transport when used by experts like Wally D'Arcy of the Third. But Skimpole of the Shell was a horse of a different colour, so to speak. Every moment of his journey downstairs on this bright May morning was a moment of breathless, hair-raising peril.

The genius of the Shell whizzed down the first part of the track at terrific speed, then flew off at a tangent and landed on the stairs with a bump that shook every bone in his body.

That would have been quite enough for Skimpole the Normal! But Skimpole the Super-man hardly needed the little accident. He rose, still smiling, and started the second part of his journey with all the enthusiasm in the world.

Crash! Bang! Thud!

By a miracle, he negotiated the second stretch in safety; and the third. A kindly providence must have been looking after Skimpole in those exciting journeys, for judgment on his part was conspicuous only by its absence.

He might have completed the whole course without further mishap had it not been for Cutts, and Gilmore,

and St. Leger, of the Fifth. Those three elegant Fifth Formers, newly risen, were standing at the foot of the stairs in the hall, quietly discussing a little project Cutts was entertaining for breaking bounds that afternoon by attending a race meeting.

Naturally, Cutts & Co. had no idea that by standing at the foot of the stairs they were in imminent peril of receiving the full weight of a Shell junior upon their elegant shoulders.

But that was what actually happened.

Skimpole saw them and yelled:

"Stand back, my good fellows—"

But it was too late. Cutts & Co. had no time to shift: no time even to realise that there was any reason for shifting!

Crash!

"Yaroooooop!"

"Whoooooop!"

Three elegant Fifth-Formers, elegant no longer, collapsed in a yelling heap.

Skimpole, after the first shock of the collision, was able to rise again unharmed.

"Dear me! How fortunate that you were there to break my fall, my good fellows!" he remarked. "Thank you very much, I am sure!"

And Skimpole made for the quad, leaving Cutts & Co. still sorting themselves out, and in the process using language which was quite surprising for Fifth-Formers.

Skimpole had a thoroughly enjoyable time during the next quarter of an hour. The fellow only learned afterwards by degrees how he knocked together the heads of several New House juniors, tweaked the nose of a Sixth-Former who was taking an early-morning stroll, and played leapfrog over the back of a gardener who was engaged in weeding one of the flower-beds. What further stirring deeds Skimpole might have performed if the breakfast bell had not sounded can only be surmised.

Fortunately, the breakfast-bell did sound, and Skimpole returned to the House, his lean face flushed and his eyes almost blazing.

There was a yell as he entered the dining-hall. Nearly everybody in the School House had by this time heard of the extraordinary developments in Herbert Skimpole.

Skimpole waved his hand in cheery acknowledgment, vaulted lightly over a couple of chairs, and took a flying leap over the Shell table, to arrive with a thud at his place at the table—a feat that was greeted with a buzz of surprise and quite a cheer from the juniors in the room.

Kildare, from the Sixth Form table, gave the transformed Skimpole a grim look, and Skimpole started slightly as he caught it. But he continued to smile cheerfully through breakfast. Apparently the forthcoming interview with Mr. Railton was not troubling him.

Everybody could see by this time that Skimpole was in the same truculent mood that had taken possession of him on the previous day, and there was some speculation as to whether he intended ignoring Kildare's order to meet him after prayers.

But Skimpole's truculence didn't carry him so far as to defy discipline altogether, and after prayers he duly presented himself to the grim-faced captain of the school and accompanied him to Mr. Railton's study.

Mr. Railton, the good-humoured Housemaster of the School House, listened to Kildare's story in blank astonishment. He could have understood it of Grundy, perhaps, or Gore in his more warlike moments—but of Skimpole—

Mr. Railton was frankly amazed.

"What ever could have possessed you to act in this extraordinary manner, Skimpole?" he asked.

Skimpole blinked up at the Housemaster with the utmost gravity.

"The fact is, my dear sir, that I feel that a person of my fearless character, enormous physical strength, and firm character should not have to recognise the authority of comparatively inferior persons like Kildare," he answered solemnly.

Mr. Railton's eyes almost bolted out of his head.

"You—you feel— Are you ill, Skimpole?" he asked, thinking for a moment that that must be the explanation.

"By no means, my dear sir. I am feeling very well—full of physical well-being and strength, in fact. Perhaps you would like ocular demonstration of the truth of my statement? If so, I am quite willing to indulge in a bout of fisticuffs with Kildare here and now, to prove the veracity of my word! If you would care to step on one side, sir—"

"Stop!" roared Mr. Railton. "You—you are actually proposing to fight Kildare in my study—"

"Precisely, my dear sir! If I may say so—"

"You may not—whatever it is you would like to say!" snapped Mr. Railton. "I must confess, Skimpole, that I am positively amazed at your shocking behaviour!"

"My dear sir——"
 "Silence! Unless you have taken leave of your senses, I see no other explanation than that you have deliberately begun a systematic course of unruly behaviour with a view to undermining school discipline!"

"If you care to interpret my actions in that way, Mr. Railton——"

"That is just how I do interpret them!"
 "Then you are quite at liberty to do so, my dear sir. I am not going to contradict you!"

Mr. Railton flushed.
 "You are impertinent, Skimpole!"
 Skimpole smiled.

"What if I am? To a person of my fearless character——"
 "I was not aware until you informed me that your character could be correctly described as fearless!" said Mr. Railton tartly. "In any case, I do not intend to argue further with anybody who has acted so absurdly and disgracefully as you have acted. It seems to me that a caning is likely to teach you more than all the lecturing I can give you. Hold out your hand, sir!"

Skimpole looked rebellious counsels prevailed, and he eventually held out his hand.
 Mr. Railton did not spare the rod with Skimpole that morning; in point of fact, the genius of the Shell was subjected to a pretty severe caning.

But he registered no sign of pain, or even discomfort, and quitted the study quite cheerfully. And Mr. Railton and Kildare were left to stare at each other in considerable astonishment.

CHAPTER 8.

"Cave!"

"HERE he comes!"
 "Good old Skinny!"
 "Three cheers for the superman!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 A somewhat noisy crowd composed of members of the Shell and Fourth greeted Skimpole at the end of Mr. Railton's passage.

Up to the time of Skimpole's dignified exit from Mr. Railton's study they had been discussing cricket. Figgins and a number of other New House juniors were there, and a rather warm argument had developed concerning the prospects of the junior inter-House match that was due to take place after dinner. But when Mr. Railton's door opened cricket quickly gave place to Herbert Skimpole.

Skimpole joined the crowd, beaming.
 "Get it hot?" inquired Tom Merry.
 "Six on each hand, my dear Merry. A mere trifle, scarcely worthy of mention."

"Ye gods!"
 "Six on each hand?"
 "From Railton, too?"
 "And you call it a mere trifle?" hooted Herries. "Oh, great pip!"

The crowd stared at Skimpole quite blankly while that amazing junior rattled cheerfully on:

"Already, my good youths, I have practically forgotten the episode. Matters of greater importance than Mr. Railton are pressing. Cricket, for instance——"

"Cricket? Always thought you despised cricket!" remarked Blake bluntly.

"Possibly I did. It is conceivable that I still do," admitted Skimpole. "That, however, is no reason why I should stand back and shirk my responsibilities when the House requires my services."

"Great pip! Who told you the House required your services?" gasped Bernard Glyn.

"I have, on reflection, come to that conclusion myself."
 "Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dear me! I fail to see in my remark any cause for the exercise of the risible faculties!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked the crowd, apparently seeing quite a lot of cause for the exercise of their risible faculties. Skimpole frowned.

"Were it not that morning classes will begin in a minute or so, I should engage you all in fisticuffs and thrash you——"

"My hat! Skimpole's gone off his rocker, then, as well as Ratty?" inquired Figgins in surprise.

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Silence!" roared Skimpole. Then, turning to Tom Merry, he remarked: "I believe that you, my dear Merry, exercise the controlling influence in the selection of the School House team for this afternoon's game?"

"Right on the wicket, old bean!"
 "Very well, then! Kindly include me in your team."
 Tom Merry laughed.

"Anything else at the same time, old chap?" he inquired.
 "Like to take over my job as skipper, for instance?"
 Skimpole nodded unobtrusively.

"An excellent suggestion, my good youth. If I may say so, my dear Merry, it is the first time I ever remember to have seen displayed in you any signs of the elements of an intellect!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Why, you silly ass——" gasped Tom.

Jack Blake interposed.
 "Half a mo', Tommy! Why not let Skimmy play, anyway? It's the first time he's ever interested himself in cricket, and I don't mind standing down just to encourage him."

Tom Merry laughed.
 "Well, it's true that we don't need all our best players out to win the game to-day. After all, it's only the New House——"

"Wha-a-t!" came an indignant yell from the New House section of the crowd.
 "And we shan't have any difficulty in licking them, even if we drop half our regular players. All right, then, Skimmy; you can play!"

"Thank you, my dear Merry! While rather resenting your attitude, I am pleased——"

"Never mind that!" interrupted Figgins grimly.
 "What I'm interested in just now is what Merry meant by that funny remark about the New House!"

"Hear, hear!" yelled the New House juniors indignantly.

Tom Merry smiled.
 "I thought my meaning was quite easily understood. I was forgetting, of course, that one has to use pretty simple language to get down to the New House level of understanding!"

"Hear, hear!" chortled the School House crowd in their turn.

"Why, you silly asses——"
 "No need to get alarmed, anyway, Figgy! I was only mentioning the simple fact that School House can always lick New House into a cocked hat without any effort!"

There was quite a roar of rage from Figgins and his followers.
 "Bump the cheeky rotter!"
 "Scrag him!"

"Lick us, indeed! What would the Junior Eleven be like without the New House men?"
 "Probably wouldn't be a Junior Eleven at all!"
 "Rats!"

"Are you saying 'rats' to me?"
 "Certainly, old bean! And many of 'em!"

Things began to assume rather a heated character. New House fellows were glaring at School House fellows. The latter were beginning to return the glares with interest.

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Ask two chums, to whom you have shown your name in this list, to sign in the space provided below.

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Witnesses automatically become eligible for a Free Gift.

Tom Merry cast a somewhat anxious glance at Mr. Railton's study.

"Hold on, chaps! Can't have a free fight under Railton's very nose. Better postpone the argument."

"Who started it?" demanded Figgins.

"You did, old bean! If you hadn't objected to my simple statement of fact—"

"You mean if you hadn't started talking a lot of rubbish—"

"Look here, Figgins!"

"Look here, Merry!"

Skimpole's voice suddenly made itself heard above the growing din.

"My good youths! If I might make a suggestion—"

"Shut up, Skimmy!"

"I regret that I cannot accede to that request. My suggestion is that to settle this argument we indulge here and now in a terrific bout of fisticuffs."

"What the thump do you know about fisticuffs, you skinny crock?" hooted Fatty Wynn. "Why, any Second Form fag from the New House could knock you into the middle of next— Yoocoop!"

"Take that, my good youth!" said Skimpole.

The first blow had been struck! It was a unique circumstance that the first blow in any House "scrap" should be struck by Herbert Skimpole. But the unique character of the circumstance was forgotten immediately afterwards. The juniors were all too busily engaged in pairing off and commencing the battle to take particular note of unique circumstances.

"Mop up the floor with the cheeky bounders!" said Figgins grimly. "I'll start with that silly ass Merry!"

"You mean Merry will start with that silly ass Figgins!" corrected Tom sweetly. "Here's something for you—the compliments of the School House!"

"Yaroooooh! Now you take this!"

"Ow!"

"Now they've asked for it; let 'em have it!" yelled Blake.

"What-ho!"

"Pile in, New House!"

"Sock it into 'em, School House!"

Bump! Thump! Bump!

The din of battle sounded on all sides now. It was a wonder that Mr. Railton had not already been attracted out of his study, which was only a few yards from the scene of the scrimmage. Possibly Mr. Railton was too engrossed in discussing with Kildare the problem of Skimpole to notice anything!

Up and down the passage surged the contesting parties. Fellows were quickly holding handkerchiefs to streaming noses and out lips. Everything pointed to the scrimmage turning very rapidly into a first-class riot.

But that stage was never reached. The battle had hardly been in progress a minute before there was a warning shout from one or two fellows on the outskirts of the crowd.

They had suddenly spotted hurrying towards the scene of the slaughter a lean figure wearing the black gown and mortarboard of a master.

One look at that figure was enough for the fellows who saw it. They recognised instantly the unprepossessing features and jerky movements of the most unpopular master at St. Jim's.

"It's Ratty!"

"Ratcliff's coming! Ease up, you chaps!"

"Oh, crikey!"

"Cave!"

CHAPTER 9.

Astonishing the Natives!

"DEAR me!" Horace Ratcliff, M.A., surveyed the crowd with a very peculiar expression on his face.

"Um!" That was all most of the juniors could say for a moment. They were breathless and hot and dusty, and many of them bore unmistakable evidence of the battle in which they had been engaged.

"Oh dear!" gasped Tom Merry.

"Ratty, of all people!" groaned Monty Lowther.

"Couldn't have been worse!"

"Dear me!" repeated Mr. Ratcliff.

He took off his spectacles and wiped them, then donned them again and made a careful survey of the breathless crowd.

"Just like the beast to pile on the agony!" muttered Jack Blake.

And that was the general opinion of Mr. Ratcliff's attitude. The juniors knew Ratty of old. It was just like him to keep them on tenterhooks as long as possible, there-

by enabling them to realise fully the enormity of their offence.

But Mr. Ratcliff, in point of fact, was for once not indulging in his favourite pastime of "rubbing it in." He was merely weighing things up for himself. The juniors, of course, were not aware of that. They quite anticipated at the end of the painful period of silence that he would burst out with a scathing, vitriolic condemnation of physical violence, boys in general, and St. Jim's boys in particular, and any other relative subject which happened to meet with his immediate disapproval.

Instead of which Mr. Ratcliff suddenly laughed.

The juniors blinked at Mr. Ratcliff. For a moment the general thought was that their ears had deceived them.

But it was not so. Mr. Ratcliff had undoubtedly laughed. Furthermore, he laughed again immediately afterwards; and, by way of an additional surprise, it was quite a hearty, cheerful laugh, the like of which most of them had never heard from Mr. Ratcliff's thin lips before.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Mr. Ratcliff.

The New House juniors looked meaningly at Figgins and Kerr and Wynn. The amazing story of what had happened in Mr. Ratcliff's study the night before had by this time spread right through the New House, and they saw in that laugh confirmation of what Figgins & Co. had told them. As for the School House juniors, who were as yet in blissful ignorance of Mr. Ratcliff's change of heart, they stared at the cheerful Housemaster of the New House in dumb astonishment.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Mr. Ratcliff. "Oh dear! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! May we inquire the reason for your laughtah, Mr. Watchiff?" ventured Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth.

Mr. Railton wiped the tears of merriment from his eyes.

"You may, my dear D'Arcy!" he replied genially. "I am laughing, as a matter of fact, at the expressions of consternation reflected in your faces. I find it extremely amusing!"

"Bai Jove!"

"I suppose"—Mr. Ratcliff paused to chuckle—"I suppose, my dear boys, that you are expecting me to award you impositions—possibly even to cane you? It is extremely amusing to me to think that I intend to do nothing of the kind! Ha, ha, ha!"

"My hat!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy adjusted his monocle and surveyed Mr. Ratcliff in astonishment.

"In that case, Mr. Watchiff, might I ask what you intend to do in the mattah?" he asked.

"What I intend to do?" repeated Mr. Ratcliff. "That is easily told, D'Arcy. I can tell you, in fact, in one short word—nothing!"

"What!"

It was a yell from the amazed juniors.

Mr. Ratcliff smiled.

"I thought you would be surprised, my dear boys. Nevertheless, I mean it. I am going to do nothing whatever in the matter."

"But—but—"

"What the thump—"

"I have come to the conclusion, you see, that in the past I have been inclined to treat you boys with far too much severity," explained Mr. Ratcliff. "Fighting, I have always treated especially severely—I might go so far as to say harshly. But all that is changed now."

"Well, my hat!"

"For the future I intend to act kindly and considerately to all of you, recognising that boys will be boys, and should be treated as boys," said Mr. Ratcliff, beaming on the

(Continued on next page.)

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gasping juniors. "I shall be obliged if from now on you will all look on me as a big brother."

"Ye gods!"
"B-b-big brother!" stuttered Jack Blake. "Oh, my sainted aunt!"
"You will find me in the future a kindly, considerate, affectionate man, who will sympathise with you in all your little troubles and difficulties," went on Mr. Ratcliff. "And now, I hope, you all understand why I was so amused to observe your dismay. It was extremely funny. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Great pip!"
School House and New House alike were absolutely flabbergasted. But more surprises were in store for them. Ere they had recovered from the first shock, Mr. Ratcliff was addressing Figgins.

"Figgins, my dear lad!"
"Oh, yes, sir!" gasped Figgins.
"I have a little request to make of you. Pray do not think I wish to impose my authority on you. I shall, however, be very grateful if you can see your way clear to grant the request."

"Sus-certainly, sir! Delighted, I'm sure!" stuttered the leader of the New House juniors.

"We were talking last night, as you will doubtless recollect, about the grand and glorious game of cricket."
"Oh crumbs! 'Grand and glorious cricket'—from Ratty! Wake me up, someone!" said Blake, sotto voce.
"The request I have to make concerns that wonderful game," went on Mr. Ratcliff. "This, then, is my request—that you include me in the New House team that is to play the School House team this afternoon."

An audible gasp went up from the listeners. They had been prepared for almost anything from Ratty after his strange behaviour in the preceding five minutes. But that he was intending asking for a place in Figgins' Eleven against the School House had certainly not occurred to any one of them.

Figgins stared blankly.
"You—you want to play against the School House in a junior match, sir?" he breathed.

"That is what I am asking, Figgins. I realise that the request is a little unusual—"

"Unusual! My hat!"
"But I am very anxious to play, if for no other reason

than to demonstrate my friendliness and good will. What is your answer, Figgins?"

"I—I had already fixed up my team, sir."
"Please yourself entirely, my dear lad."
"But—but if you really want to play, sir," gasped Figgins, "then we shall be very pleased to drop somebody else and include you in our team. Shan't we, you chaps?"

"Oh dear!"
"Yes, rather, sir!"
"Delighted!"
Mr. Ratcliff beamed.

"That is very kind of you, Figgins—very kind, indeed. I shall therefore have very much pleasure in playing for you, and I feel sure that I shall score a great many goals."

"M-m-my hat!"
"Now I must go. The bell will be ringing for classes in a minute," said Mr. Ratcliff. "One thing I have remembered, though, before I take my departure. Trimble!"

"Ow! Yes, sir!" gasped Trimble of the Fourth.
"I happened, by chance, to overhear you endeavouring to raise a loan from one of your schoolfellows yesterday."

"Oh, lor'! D-d-did you, sir?" gasped Trimble, his podgy face dropping. "The—the fact is that was just a sort of lark. Knowing what a rotten eavesdropper you are—"

"What!"
"I thought I'd just do it to make you think I was really asking for a loan, you see, sir, whereas I really wasn't doing anything of the kind. I hope you believe me, sir."

"Ha, ha, ha!"
Mr. Ratcliff's beaming expression had changed a little. But he still managed to preserve a smile.

"I really don't know whether to believe you or not, Trimble."

"Oh, really, sir, it's true, anyway! In fact, I always tell the truth. Any of these fellows will tell you how truthful I am."

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Well, did you manage to raise the loan?" asked Mr. Ratcliff.

Trimble granted.
"No. The measly rotter told me he'd lend me a penny to go and get myself run over; but nothing more. That is to say, I didn't really want a loan at all," he finished, remembering the first part of his story again.

"Ha, ha, ha!"
Mr. Ratcliff chuckled.

"Dear me! You really are a very amusing lad, Trimble. What I was coming to was this—if you are still in need of the money, I shall be very pleased to make you a little present of ten shillings. In fact, here you are."

And Mr. Ratcliff pressed a ten-shilling note into Trimble's podgy paw, and marched off.

And the crowd was left to stare after his retreating figure in utter dumbfounded amazement, while Trimble, the ten-shilling note reposing in his outstretched hand, gasped and blinked like a newly-landed fish.

Beyond any possible, probable shadow of doubt, Mr. Ratcliff had succeeded in astonishing the natives as they had never been astonished before.

CHAPTER 10.

Ratty versus Skimpy!

"**W**HAT the thump—"
"What the merry dickens—"
"Can it be?" demanded Jack Blake. "Yes, it is!"

"It's Ratty!" roared Herries. "Oh, ye gods!"
"Ha, ha, ha!"

The crowd outside the pavilion on Little Side yelled.
A weirdly-attired figure had just come out of the New House, and was walking briskly over to the playing-fields.

The juniors didn't recognise the newcomer as Mr. Ratcliff at first. Then, as he drew nearer, they could tell him by his face.

There was little else by which he could be distinguished. Mr. Ratcliff was dressed as he had never been seen to dress before. A skin-tight pair of flannel trousers encased his thin legs, a cricketer's cap that could not have seen the light of day for thirty years, at least, crowned his grizzled head, and by way of an outer covering he wore an ancient blazer of weird and wonderful design, the hues of which would have turned Joseph, the celebrated owner of the coat of many colours, green with envy.

Mr. Ratcliff, however, seemed quite pleased with his appearance. He came up to the pavilion, beaming.

The juniors saluted him respectfully.
"Still want to play, sir?" asked Figgins.
"Most decidedly, my dear Figgins—that is, of course, provided you are still willing to allow me to play?"

Picking 'em up all round the dial

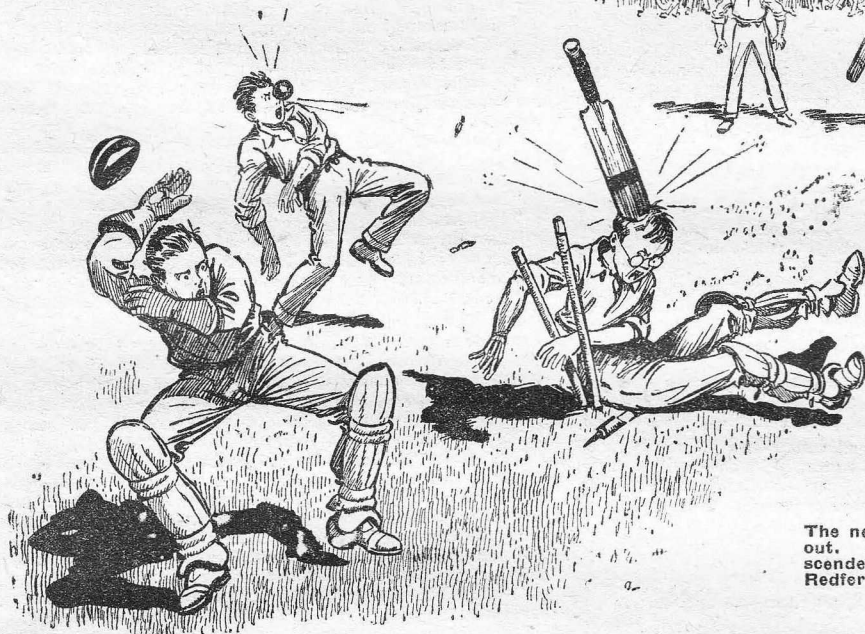
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"Oh, quite willing, sir! Awfully keen, in fact," gasped Figgins. "We shall be making a start very soon."
 "Excellent! Who, may I inquire, has to kick the goals first?" asked Mr. Ratcliff.
 Figgins shuddered. He found Mr. Ratcliff's appalling ignorance of cricket a little unnerving at times.
 "Fraid you're getting a bit mixed up, sir," he replied. "Goals are kicked in footer—football, you know. In cricket we score runs."
 "Oh! Ah! Precisely!" said Mr. Ratcliff, with a nod.
 "Well, who scores the runs first, my dear Figgins?"
 "School House, sir. We've just tossed, and Merry won and elected to go in first."
 "Then we bowl; is that the procedure?" asked Mr. Ratcliff, smiling to such an extent that some of the juniors seriously began to wonder whether his face could stand the strain much longer.
 "Just that!" agreed Figgins. "Of course, we don't all bowl at the same time—"
 "Dear me! Why not?" asked Mr. Ratcliff innocently.
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Some of us have to field, you see, while the bowling goes on," explained Figgins. "Well, if you're ready, sir, we'll—"
 "I am quite ready, Figgins!"
 "Then we'll get on the field, and I'll show you where to stand. Your first men ready, Merry?"
 Tom Merry nodded.

face as he went to retrieve the ball. Even the New House supporters couldn't help seeing the funny side of it, though the humour of the situation had still not touched the players themselves.
 The School House batsmen, taking advantage of Ratty's presence on the field, began to hit out freely in his direction. Figgins, to counteract this move, stood two of his men near the cheerful Housemaster. But even then, Mr. Ratcliff managed to butt in and spoil their fielding almost every time.
 There was simply no stopping him. Mr Ratcliff was here, there, and everywhere, impeding the fielders, missing catches, and foiling other players' catches.
 The laughter round the pitch was continuous, while Figgins and his merry men almost tore their hair.
 "Oh, crikey! This is dreadful!" muttered Figgins, when



The next instant two yells rang out. Skimpole's bat had descended on his head, while Redfern had received the ball in his eye!

"All serene, Figgy! Blake and Talbot go in first."
 Talbot and Blake began a useful first-wicket partnership which gave the School House a good start before it was dissolved.
 The New House quickly found that Mr. Ratcliff was going to be more of a hindrance than a help.
 In the first over he missed the simplest catch imaginable, and, to add insult to injury, laughed immoderately over the incident.
 Shortly after that he made a furious charge at Redfern, who was fielding the ball, sending that astonished junior sprawling on the ground, and thereby allowing the ball to travel on comfortably to the boundary line.
 There was a roar of laughter from the large crowd of spectators which had assembled in the expectation of seeing some fun. The New House players, however, didn't quite see the humour of the situation; their faces were grim as they turned their eyes to the wicket again.
 "Go it, sir!" roared the School House supporters round the field, as Mr. Ratcliff chased after the next ball that happened to come his way.
 "Good old Ratty!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 Mr. Ratcliff, apparently under the impression that they were applauding some unique feat on his part, abandoned the chase and bowed repeatedly to the cheering crowds, and the ball once more trickled over the boundary line to add another 4 to the School House score.
 Yells of laughter went up at the expression on Figgins'

the School House score had reached 150 for the loss of only four wickets.
 Mr. Ratcliff came trotting up at that moment, beaming all over his face.
 "Doing well, my dear Figgins, are we not?" he remarked.
 "If I might make a suggestion, however do you not think we might do even better if you put me on to bowl?"
 "Oh dear!" was Figgins' only reply to that brilliant suggestion.
 "I feel sure that I should be able to bowl out a great number of our opponents with very great celerity," said Mr. Ratcliff. "Please yourself, my dear boy, of course; but I trust that you will bear my suggestion in mind!"
 "I—I will, sir!" Figgins managed to gasp.
 Shortly after that, Fatty Wynn, who like the rest, had been a little unnerved by the tactics of their new recruit, bowled out D'Arcy with one of his best "yorkers."
 The New House players expected that, as usually happened, Lowther or Herries would be next man in. They received quite a shock when they saw a thin, weedy figure strolling down instead.
 "Skimpole!" yelled Fatty Wynn. "What the merry dickens—"
 Figgins glared.
 "My hat! This is the last straw. Those School House bouncers are pulling our legs now!"
 "Treating the whole thing as a walk-over!" groaned Kerr. "This is awful, Figgy! What can we do?"

Figgins' eyes gleamed. He had a sudden inspiration. "I know what I've a jolly good mind to do. The tatters have begun to treat it as a farce, so far as they're concerned; I'm jolly well inclined to treat it as a farce for our part, too!"

"But how?"
Figgins grinned.
"Why, by putting on Ratty to bowl instead of Wynn!"
"Oh, great pip!"
"More I think about it, the more I like it. It'll be giving 'em tit for tat; and, after all, Ratty can't possibly bowl worse than Skimpole can bat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"I'll jolly well do it!" said Figgins, with sudden determination. "Mr. Ratcliff!"

"Yes, my dear Figgins!" responded Mr. Ratcliff.
"Would you like to come on to bowl instead of Wynn?" Mr. Ratcliff beamed.

"I'd be delighted, my dear lad—simply delighted!"
"Good egg! Stand down, Fatty, will you?"
"My hat!" said Fatty Wynn. And he duly stood down, and handed his ball over to his elderly successor with a very extraordinary expression on his round face. It was the first time that the best junior bowler at St. Jim's had ever been asked to stand down in favour of Mr. Ratcliff!

There was a roar from the spectators as they saw what Figgins had done.

"Ratty's bowling!"
"Oh, my giddy aunt!"
"Go it, sir!"
"Mind your eyes, you chaps!"
"Ha, ha, ha!"

Amid yells of ironical applause, Skimpole took up his stand at the wicket, and Mr. Ratcliff walked back for a preliminary run.

"Play, my dear Skimpole!" shouted Mr. Ratcliff.
And, with a stern, resolute look in his eyes, Mr. Ratcliff took a short run, twisted himself up into a sort of catherine-wheel, and let fly.

An instant later, Skimpole, who was, if anything, even more grimly determined than Mr. Ratcliff, lifted his bat and made a terrific swipe at the spot where he thought the ball might bounce.

Unfortunately, Skimpole's swipe was so terrific that it completely overbalanced him. Skimpole sat down violently, and his bat flew up in the air.

The next instant two agonised yells rang out across the field.

One proceeded from Skimpole, whose bat, after a whirling aerial flight, descended with fearful force on his own head; and the other came from Redfern of the New House.

Redfern had been standing at square-leg, a considerable distance from the wicket, and, naturally, hadn't anticipated any danger from the bowler. But he hadn't counted on Mr. Ratcliff. All sorts of peculiar things were liable to happen when Mr. Ratcliff played cricket!

"Yaroooogh!" roared Skimpole.
"Yooooooop!" howled Redfern.
And then the injured players' roars of pain were drowned by a fresh roar of a different kind from the spectators.
"Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER 11. The Last Straw!

"**H**A, ha, ha!"
Mr. Ratcliff looked at Skimpole, then looked at Redfern, then looked at the hysterical spectators.

"Dear me!" he remarked.
"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Apparently I must have missed the wicket. How very extraordinary!"
"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is really the most surprising phenomenon I have observed for a considerable time. Pray throw the ball over, and I will have another try!"

"Groooogh!"
"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Injured, Reddy?" asked Figgins.
"Ow! I suppose I shall be all right!" groaned Redfern.
"Give that maniac the ball; I shall be tempted to brain him with it if I get hold of it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"What about you, Skimmy?"
"Grooogh! Dear me! I thought for a moment, that I had sustained concussion; but I feel a little better now. How very surprising that the bat should have struck me like that!"
"Ha, ha, ha!"

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"Going on, old chap?" inquired Kerr.
"Ow! Certainly. To a fellow of my courageous disposition, a trifle like this is nothing! Wow!"
"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Carry on, then!" grinned Figgins. And the game began again.

There was a deadly gleam in Mr. Ratcliff's eye as he prepared to bowl again. Ratty was genuinely surprised that the ball had gone so far wide of the mark on the first occasion, and he felt determined to do or die now.

Skimpole faced him, looking equally determined. It was really quite surprising what a lot of determination the two novices were putting into a game which everybody else was regarding as utterly farcical by this time.

"Play, my dear Skimpole!" yelled Mr. Ratcliff, for the second time.

Skimpole got ready to play.
Again, the sporting Housemaster took a little run and twisted himself into a catherine-wheel.

The ball whizzed out of his hand, and this time, more, perhaps, by luck than judgment, it went somewhere near the mark.

It might even have struck the wicket, but unfortunately for Ratty's hopes of triumph, something happened to impede its progress.

That "something" was Skimpole.
Skimpole fairly jumped to meet the ball. And the ball fairly jumped to meet Skimpole.

"Whoooooop!" howled Skimpole.
Simultaneously he leaped into the air as though electrified.

He had certainly succeeded in his intention of stopping the ball; but now that he had done so, he wished with all his heart that he hadn't. For Skimpole had stopped it with his massive forehead; and he found the experience decidedly painful.

"Yarooooh, Whoooooop!" howled Skimpole. "I am suffering severely! This will lead to cerebral complications. Ow!"

"My hat! Cricket a la Skimpole!" gasped Figgins.
"Not to mention a la Ratty!" gurgled Kerr.

"Ha, ha, ha!"
Skimpole was for the time being dancing about like a wild Dervish; Mr. Ratcliff was blinking at him, his face a comical mixture of surprise and dismay; and players and spectators alike were yelling with helpless laughter.

All interest in the game as a serious fixture had by this time died out. Tom Merry, by sending Skimpole in to bat, had definitely turned the affair into a farce, and Figgins, in his answering move, had put the finishing touch to it. The spectators were now no longer interested in the result. They merely wondered what would be the next farcical turn to this amazing match.

They were not long left in doubt.
Skimpole eventually brought his dance to an end, picked up his bat again in a mechanical fashion, and then fixed a deadly, concentrated glare on Mr. Ratcliff. A big bump was already beginning to gather in the middle of his prominent forehead. It hurt; and the more it hurt, the more Skimpole felt like hurting Mr. Ratcliff.

"Ow! You dangerous, irresponsible person!" he roared suddenly.

"Two days before, to have addressed such a remark as that to Mr. Ratcliff would have been inviting trouble of a fearful kind. But the Mr. Ratcliff of this day was a very different person from the Mr. Ratcliff of two days before. He merely blinked.

"My dear lad—"
"Nonsense, my dear sir!" roared Skimpole. "In fact, if I may say so, bosh—utter bosh!"
"My dear Skimpole, I sincerely trust that you are not injured—"

"I am, my dear sir—painfully injured!"
"I am very sorry—"
"That is not enough for me, my dear sir; I intend to make you sorrier!"

"Skimmy!" exclaimed Figgins.
Skimpole shook his head.

"I intend to listen to no argument, my good youth. This wretched creature has presumed on his authority as a master to subject me to physical violence with a cricket ball. To that, I can make only one effective answer, and the answer in question can best be made with the aid of this bat. I will now proceed to make it!"

And Skimpole, his eyes blazing and his cricket bat grasped firmly in his hand, rushed forward at Mr. Ratcliff.

Figgins and one or two others gave a yell.
"Skimpole, you ass—"
"You can't!"
"Mustn't!"
"You'll get the giddy sack! Come back!"

(Continued at foot of next page.)

ASK THE ORACLE!



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to do next. When I go out and look, I find he's not doing anything at all. He tells me he's going to look for another job—a place where he can start at twelve, have two hours for lunch, and the afternoon off! Looking for that job will be the toughest bit of work he's tackled up to date.

Q.—What is Dobie?

A.—"Dobie," "Young Book-lover," should really be spelt "Adobe." It is a Spanish-American word for the sun-dried clay used for building in Northern Mexico. The clay is wetted and mixed with chopped straw, grass roots, and so on. The mixture is trampled with bare feet until it reaches the right consistency, and then it's cut up into bricks. This adobe, or dobie, is excellent stuff for building in extreme climates as it is a poor conductor of heat and cold. Houses built of it remain cool in summer and warm in winter.

Q.—Why can Polar bears walk on ice?

A.—If I didn't know any better, I might have answered George Hemming's query by saying that it was because they have four legs. Having been to the Zoo several times—not as an inmate—I happen to know that the soles of the Polar bear's feet are covered with bristles, which enable him to slip along the slippery slopes without falling slap on the ice.

Q.—What is "the trial of the pyx"?

A.—The word "Pyx," S. Williams, of Potter's Bar, comes from a Greek word meaning a box or chest. In the English Mint, where they make the money, there is a box in which are placed one coin from every fifteen pounds of newly-coined gold, and one coin from every sixty pounds of newly-coined silver. These coins are examined, and this examination is called the "trial of the pyx."

Q.—Who were the Wise Men of Gotham?

A.—I can't give you their names and addresses, "Curious," of Caterham, but they were alive and kicking in the time of King John. The story goes that King John wanted to live at Gotham, an idea which did not meet with the approval of the inhabitants of that Nottingham town. In order to put him off the idea, they pretended

to be off their heads when he sent his messengers to see them. They did it so well that the king changed his mind and decided to live somewhere else.

Q.—Is my hair white or grey?

A.—White, sonny. It turned white a week after I engaged my office-boy. It's still turning. It gets whiter and whiter, chum, every week. Some people think it's age; but it's not—it's just worry. Worry over that boy. I'm always wondering what he's going



Can a Polar Bear walk on ice? I should think he can. You see, he has special feet for this purpose!

Q.—Why are flounders flat?

A.—George Brooks, who lives at Basingstoke, asks "Why are flounders flat?" No doubt he thinks he has cracked a joke and bowled me out with that. The flounder loves to flop and flound and flap along the foam, but if I found a flounder round I guess I'd take it home. Take all the flounders you can find from now till kingdom come, and walk all round the flounder's ground till you've got whiskers, chum! You'll never catch one walking out, nor see one raise his hat; when other fish are round about the flounder's always flat!

Q.—When was the Football Association formed?

A.—In October, 1863, "Young Soccerite."

But Skimpole heeded not. His mind was made up. Mr. Ratcliff let out a kind of squeak of alarm. "My dear Skimpole—"

Then Skimpole was upon him, his bat upraised, and a homicidal look in his eyes. Mr. Ratcliff did not stop to argue, then. With a wild howl of alarm, he fled.

And then the amazed spectators were treated to a thrilling athletic event, the like of which had never before been seen on Little Side. Mr. Ratcliff, yelling with alarm, fled for his life round the cricket pitch. After him, waving his bat and breathing fire and slaughter, came Herbert Skimpole.

Several of the players, as much in Skimpole's interest as Ratty's, tried to chip in. But they hurriedly dodged out of the way again as Skimpole came racing along. Skimmy's whirling bat looked a little too much of a good thing.

"Two to one in doughnuts on Ratty!" yelled Jack Blake, from the front of the pavilion.

"Go it, Skimmy!" roared Gore.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, my hat! Ever seen anything like it?" howled Herries.

And the juniors had to admit that they never had.

Mr. Ratcliff stumbled at last. That was fatal for him. With a triumphant war-whoop, Skimmy was upon him, and then his bat found a target at last.

Thwack, thwack, thwack!

"Whoooop!" yelled Mr. Ratcliff. "Ow! My dear, good boy—groogh!"

"Oh crikey! Drag him off, for goodness' sake!" gasped Figgins, rushing to the rescue.

"Stop it, Skimmy!"

A crowd of fellows surrounded the vengeful Skimpole, and the Shell junior, still yelling for the Housemaster's blood, was yanked away.

Mr. Ratcliff, groaning, was yanked to his feet, and the

crowd, swelled now by numerous spectators, waited for the storm to burst. Nobody had any doubt that this was the end of Mr. Ratcliff's amazing good humour.

But it wasn't!

To everybody's utter astonishment, Mr. Ratcliff, after gingerly rubbing his anatomy and groaning once or twice, began once more to smile.

"Hurt, sir?" gasped Tom Merry, who had come down from the pavilion.

Ratty actually laughed.

"Not much, my dear Merry. Pray do not ill-treat that unfortunate lad; he has suffered enough already on my account!"

"My hat!"

"In fact I feel still that I must make amends to him by offering him my very humblest apology!" went on Mr. Ratcliff. "Skimpole, my dear lad!"

"Rats!" was Skimpole's impolite retort. "If I may say so, my dear sir, rats and many of them!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Mr. Ratcliff. "Amusing, my dear lads! A most amusing colloquialism! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Great pip!"

"Is it any good, my dear Skimpole, offering you a very humble apology for unintentionally striking you with the cricket ball?" asked Mr. Ratcliff. "I am aware, of course, that it will not ease the pain—"

"Precisely, my dear sir!" roared Skimpole. "For that reason, I do not intend to accept your apology. I do not intend in the future to accept apologies from any master. Botheration to all masters is my motto!"

"My dear Skimpole—"

"Again, sir, rats! Dash you! Blow you!" hooted Skimpole, showing a surprising gift for invective. "Blow all masters, if it comes to that!"

"Skimmy!" begged Figgins, almost with tears in his eyes.

"Silence!" roared the truculent Skimpole. "Who are the masters, anyway? Why should they boss it over us? Are we not as good as they are?"

"Skimmy—"

"Blow them—every one of them. Blow the Head, if it comes to that!"

"Wha-aat!"

There was a yell at that. Blowing the masters was one thing, but blowing the sacred person of the Head was rather different. It seemed to come into a totally different category, somehow. The crowd stared at Skimpole, almost fascinated.

"Stop it, Skimmy!" urged Jack Blake. "Ratty's one thing, but you can't drag the Head into it!"

"Bai Jove! Wathah not!"

Skimpole glared.

"I make no distinction, my good youths. I say blow the Head, and I mean it. Blow him! Bother him!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Why should a fearless, intellectual fellow like myself submit to the authority of a creature like Dr. Holmes?" demanded Skimpole. "I bow to the authority of no master, headmaster, or anything else. Blow the Head! I've a good mind to rag him, just to show my independence!"

"Why, you utter ass—"

"In fact, I will!" said Skimpole suddenly. "Why not? Nobody has ever done it before. Then I'll do it! Skimpole shall blaze the trail to freedom!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I can see no reason for the exercise of the risible faculty! You think I am joking?"

"Well, I can't think you're serious, Skimmy," grinned Figgins.

"Then I will show you!" roared Skimpole.

And the Super-man of the Shell, with a sudden violent movement that took his captors by surprise, shook himself free.

There was a yell.

"Stop the silly ass!"

"Don't let him escape!"

"Oh crikey!"

There was a wild scramble to stop Skimpole. But Skimpole, in his inspired state, seemed to be endowed with the slipperiness of an eel. He eluded all the hands that were extended to him and started racing for the School House at a speed that might have brought him renown on the cinder-track.

The crowd stood for a moment staring after him in frozen horror.

"He—he can't mean it!" breathed Tom Merry.

"But he does! The chap's as mad as a hatter!" said Jack Blake.

"Then there's only one thing for it, he'll have to be stopped! After him!" roared Tom Merry.

And the entire crowd streamed after the fleeting Skimpole.

CHAPTER 12.

Fuel to the Flames!

SKIMPOLE won the race.

His revolutionary instincts must have lent him wings, for there were several champion sprinters among his pursuers. But Skimpole outdistanced them all.

Up the School House steps he went, three at a time, raced through the deserted Hall, shot up the flight of stairs leading to the Head's study and hurtled into that sacred apartment.

Dr. Holmes was not in, which was perhaps fortunate both for the Head and Skimpole.

After a moment's pause, Skimpole locked the door.

Almost immediately after there was a rush of many feet in the passage outside, followed by a hammering on the door.

"Skimmy, you ass—"

"Come out! Chuck it!"

"Give it up, old bean!"

"For goodness' sake—"

A dozen voices from the other side of the door begged and urged Skimpole to withdraw from the hole into which he had landed.

Skimpole's reply was brief and to the point.

"Rats!"

"Bai Jove! I wondah if the Head is at home, deah boys!" came D'Arcy's voice.

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"Can't be, or we'd hear him; but we mustn't allow that cheerful chump to remain inside!"

"Wathah not! Pway open the door, Skimmy!"

"Rats!" repeated Skimpole. "I beg of you to depart, my good youths. As the Head is absent I am unable to rag him personally; I am, therefore, going to rag his study instead!"

"Oh crikey!"

"Don't do it, Skimmy, old man!"

"Drop it!" groaned Figgins. "Forget it, Skimmy, before it's too late!"

"Rats!" said Skimpole, for the third time.

After which he no longer troubled to reply to the crowd's entreaties.

Outside, the crowd, swollen by this time till it filled the entire passage, fairly buzzed with excitement.

Inside, Herbert Skimpole, his eyes gleaming with a strange light, went quietly and methodically about his self-imposed task of ragging the sacred study of the Headmaster of St. Jim's.

Skimpole had had very little experience in the gentle art of study ragging. In the past he had always been inclined to look down on ragging of all kinds as childish and a little imbecilic. But he must have picked up a good many tips at secondhand, for the way he went about ragging the Head's study would have done credit to the most experienced in the craft.

His first move was to shovel out from the flue a considerable quantity of soot. This he spread evenly round the room, decorating the carpet, the rug, and the seats of all the chairs, with great impartiality.

After that, he emptied the inkwells over the desk and table. Then he threw away the flowers contained in one or two vases placed in various corners of the room and sprinkled the water over the floor.

His next move was to take down one or two pictures and hang the rest upside down. Following which feat he tipped out the contents of a big bookcase and started kicking the books into every corner of Dr. Holmes' study.

By that time the room was beginning to present rather an untidy appearance. Skimpole looked round and nodded approvingly.

"Dear me! Quite effective!" he murmured. "Let me see—"

There was a big sheet of drawing paper on the Head's desk. Skimpole produced a fountain-pen and performed a few rapid strokes which eventually resolved themselves into a caricature of a schoolmaster. Underneath this libellous artistic effort, the genius of the Shell scrawled in big, printed letters: "THE HEAD!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Skimpole, highly pleased with the result.

He stuck the picture into a corner of the mirror which stood on the mantelpiece and surveyed the room again.

Really, it was becoming quite difficult to find any further scope for ragging activities by this time. Skimpole paused, wondering what other feat he could perform. And while he paused, the buzzing of the crowd outside seemed to swell to a crescendo of sound then suddenly died away.

"The Head!" Skimpole heard somebody say.

"My hat! Now there'll be fireworks!"

Outside the study, a suddenly tongued-tied crowd was parting to make a passage for Dr. Holmes, who had just appeared on the scene.

The Head was looking utterly amazed.

"Bless my soul! Whatever is the matter?" he asked.

"Hem!"

"You see, sir—" began Tom Merry.

"It's like this, sir—" mumbled Jack Blake.

"Bai Jove! The fact is, Doctah Holmes—"

But nobody seemed to be able to frame an explanation in words. The situation seemed altogether beyond explanation.

Dr. Holmes looked at the crowd, then looked at the door of his study.

"Dear me! Can it be possible that an intruder has been found in my study?" he asked. "If somebody has seen a housebreaker or some lawless person—"

"It's—it's hardly a housebreaker, sir," almost groaned Tom Merry. "It's—it's—"

"The—the fact is, sir—" stuttered Blake.

Dr. Holmes uttered an angry exclamation.

"Have you all taken leave of your senses?" he asked.

"If there is somebody in my study—"

"There is, sir."

"Then access must be gained to the room, and the intruder secured!" snapped the Head. "Pray make way for me!"

"Oh, yes, sir!"

The crowd parted, and the Head stepped up to the



The door swung back and Herbert Skimpole greeted the Head with a bland smile. "Good-afternoon, my dear sir!" he said.

study door and tried the handle. The door, of course, did not yield. Dr. Holmes rapped on it.

"Who is there?" he demanded. "Let me in at once, whoever you are!"

"Dear me! The Head!" came a voice from within the room.

Then there was the grating sound of a key being turned in the lock. The door swung back, and Herbert Skimpole of the Shell greeted the Head with a bland smile.

"Good-afternoon, my dear sir!" he said.

"Oh crikey! Look!" gasped Figgins.

The crowd looked at the dreadful scene in the Head's study and gasped. As for the Head himself, he seemed too taken back even to gasp. He just stood in the doorway and stared.

"What—what—what—" he stuttered.

His eyes wandered from the soot and water on the carpet to the inkstains on the table, from the inkstains on the table to the inverted pictures, and from those to the libellous caricature over the mantelpiece.

Finally, the Head's horrified gaze turned to Skimpole himself.

"Skimpole!" he muttered.

"Dr. Holmes!"

"Skimpole," said the Head—"Skimpole!"

"My dear sir—"

"Is it— Can it be possible that this dreadful havoc has been caused by you?" asked the Head, in a voice that was icy and calm.

Skimpole nodded.

"Precisely, my dear sir! Every bit of it!"

The Head seemed to quiver. When he spoke again his voice was deeper, and not quite so calm.

"Boy, you have the astounding temerity to admit that you have wrecked my study?"

"Certainly, Dr. Holmes! It was my original intention to wreck you personally—"

"What—what—" stuttered the Head.

"As you were not here, my dear sir, I decided that the next best thing was to wreck your study. As you see, I have made an excellent job of it."

"Boy!"

"Against you personally, my dear sir, I have no grudge," went on Skimpole cheerfully. "This, I might explain, is merely a declaration of independence on my part."

"Boy!" boomed the Head.

"I told these good youths that I no longer recognised your right to authority over me, and I have done this purely as a gesture."

"Boy!" thundered the Head. "Wretched, depraved youth! Are you mad?"

"Certainly not, sir," answered Skimpole. "I assure you, my dear sir, that I am as sane as you are—probably more so."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Dr. Holmes looked back into the passage for a moment, and the laughter died away with astonishing suddenness. He turned round to Skimpole again.

"You have lost your reason, boy; there is no other explanation," he said. "I will detain you and send for a doctor immediately. A medical report on the state of your brain is essential before I take any steps in this extraordinary matter. Merry!"

"Yes, sir."

"Kindly see if any of the masters are about. Fetch one of them here immediately."

"Here's one coming, sir," said Jack Blake.

"Bai Jove, it's Mr. Watcliff!"

There was an excited buzz as Mr. Ratcliff appeared round the corner of the passage. The Housemaster of the New House was still dressed in his weird cricketing attire, and, furthermore, was still smiling.

Dr. Holmes started at the sight of Mr. Ratcliff in his strange habiliments. But more urgent matters than the subject of Mr. Ratcliff's attire were pressing, and he passed that over.

"Mr. Ratcliff! Thank Heaven you have arrived!" he exclaimed. "An astounding thing has happened, my dear sir. During my absence from my study, Skimpole, whom you see here, has broken in and utterly wrecked it. Kindly step over here and see for yourself, Mr. Ratcliff."

Mr. Ratcliff, still smiling, stepped over.

He looked into the ruined study, took in all the details of Skimpole's handiwork, then looked back at the Head.

Then, to the half-incredulous horror of the crowd, and the shocked amazement of Dr. Holmes, he burst into a loud and prolonged roar of laughter.

CHAPTER 13.

"As You Were!"

"MR. RATCLIFF!"

Dr. Holmes' tones were awe-inspiring. His lips were tightened, and his brows thunderous. He looked the embodiment of outraged dignity as he faced the hilarious Housemaster of the New House.

"SKIMPOLE THE SUPER-MAN!"

(Continued from page 23.)

But nothing could apparently inspire awe in Mr. Ratcliff at present. He continued to laugh uproariously. He went even farther than that. With a movement too quick for the Head to dodge, he suddenly turned round and gave his superior a hearty slap on the back.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Mr. Ratcliff.

Dr. Holmes stepped back, his eyes almost goggling out of his head.

"Mr. Ratcliff—sir!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Oh dear! This, sir, is really funny!"

"Mr. Ratcliff!" hooted the outraged Head.

"Look what the dear lad has done!" almost wept Mr. Ratcliff. "Tipped water and soot all over the carpet, hung all the pictures upside down— Oh dear! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bless my soul!"

"Why, the boy is obviously a genius!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff. "It's a most wonderful achievement. The finest rag I have witnessed for many a long day! Congratulations, Skimpole!"

"My dear sir—"

Dr. Holmes, utterly at a loss, looked helplessly from Skimpole to Mr. Ratcliff, and then to the crowd. Mr. Ratcliff's amazing hilarity coming on top of Skimpole's extraordinary and unprecedented behaviour, seemed to have temporarily deprived him of his powers of action.

"Dear me!" he muttered.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Mr. Ratcliff.

"As I was just explaining, my dear sir—" said Skimpole gravely, indulging in the luxury of an interminable speech.

And in this strain the triangular tragedy might have continued indefinitely, but for a sudden interruption.

The interruption in question came from the end of the passage, round the corner of which a rather seedy-looking man with dreamy eyes had suddenly appeared.

"Begging your pardon, young gentlemen—" he said, by way of introduction.

"Hallo! Hallo! Who's this?"

"Bai Jove! It's Mr. Mix twom Wylcombe! What do you require, Mr. Mix?"

Mr. Mix, herbalist and general merchant, rubbed his chin a little awkwardly.

"Hem! I'm looking for one of your young gentlemen— fellow with a big head and spectacles. Skimpole his name is, so they told me at the gates."

"Skimpole? He's standin' quite close to you, deah boy."

Mr. Mix started.

"Well, well! So he is! And he's still alive and well, by the look of him. Thank goodness for that!"

"What the thump—"

"Why on earth shouldn't he be alive and well, anyway?" demanded Blake.

Mr. Mix blinked at the juniors rather nervously.

"That's just it, young gentlemen; that's why I'm here. But, perhaps, come to think of it, he didn't want it for himself. Has anyone else in the school seemed different during the last two days?"

"My hat! Haven't noticed anyone!"

"Has anyone been behaving a bit funny—mad-like, and so on? For instance, Master Skimpole?"

"Great pip! Skimpole has certainly!"

"That's it, then!" declared Mr. Mix. "He's taken the mixture, and it's gone to his head!"

"Mixture?"

"Call a doctor, somebody! It's urgent!" roared Mr. Mix. "And lemme see Master Skimpole at once!"

So saying, Mr. Mix pushed his way through the crowd, and came face to face with Skimpole.

The genius of the Shell ceased his peroration at the sight of the Rylcombe tradesman, and started a little.

"Dear me! Mr. Mix!" he exclaimed.

"Master Skimpole!"

"Who is this man?" demanded the Head.

"What ever are you doing here, my dear sir?" asked Skimpole, without replying to the Head's question. "I have no complaint to make concerning the tonic I bought from you; in fact, I am exceedingly pleased with it!"

Mr. Mix groaned aloud.

"Oh dear! How much have you taken of it, sir?"

"So far, only two doses—"

"Thank goodness for that!" cried Mr. Mix fervently. "There's still a chance that you may pull through. But the other bottle—what I thought was 'Nevermoan'—what about that?"

"That, my dear sir, I gave to Mr. Ratcliff, whom you see beside me. But—"

Mr. Mix wheeled round and grabbed Mr. Ratcliff by the lapel of his multi-coloured blazer.

"You haven't taken any, sir? Say that you haven't taken any!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Mr. Ratcliff, highly amused. "Not taken any, you say? Why, I've already taken three doses! And an excellent remedy I have found it, too! It has made me more happy and good-humoured than I have ever felt before! Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Mix lifted up his hands in a gesture of despair.

"Then you've done it; you'll perish! Fetch a doctor, somebody, before it's too late!"

"What!"

The Head jumped forward and grasped the despairing herbalist by the arm.

"What are you saying, my good man? What ever has happened that causes you to speak of the possible demise of this gentleman?"

Mr. Mix gulped.

"It's all a mistake, sir. When the inquests are held—"

"Utterly absurd! What inquests?"

"The inquests on Master Skimpole and this gent in the funny clothes—"

"What!" shrieked Mr. Ratcliff and Skimpole simultaneously, their faces suddenly turning a greenish hue.

"Then I'm sure the jury will find it was a mistake. Really, sir, I didn't intend to poison them!"

"Poison?" hooted the Head. "But, my dear, good man—"

"You see, sir, quite by chance, I gave them horse medicines instead of what they wanted—"

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

He began to see a little glimmer of daylight suddenly. Others began to see it, too. They looked from Skimpole to Mr. Ratcliff with a dawning understanding of the meaning of the eccentric behaviour of that peculiar pair.

Master Skimpole wanted a tonic, you see, sir. Unfortunately, what I gave him was a very strong tonic, intended for horses." Mr. Mix coughed. "It's what some gentlemen buy to give to racehorses just before the start of a race, sir. And there's enough poison in it to put 'paid' to a human being!"

"Yaroooooogh!" roared Skimpole. "Then I'm poisoned! I thought the mixture was making me bold and fearless, and all the time I was being poisoned! Help!"

"Oh, great pip!"

"And Mr. Ratcliff has also taken some of this—this noxious preparation?" asked the Head.

"No, sir; he took a different lot—but just as poisonous!"

"Ow! I feel ill!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff.

"What he sent for was a bottle of 'Nevermoan,' my famous preparation for curing bad tempers," explained Mr. Mix.

"Dear me!" exclaimed the Head, starting slightly.

He had suddenly remembered his conversation with Mr. Ratcliff in the quad; likewise, he had recollected that Skimpole had also been there on that occasion.

Dr. Holmes also began to see daylight now.

"What I gave him," said Mr. Mix, "was a cure for bad-tempered horses. Stuff that wouldn't do any harm to a big cart-horse, naturally; but strong enough to polish off any human being!"

"Ow! Help! Save me!" moaned Mr. Ratcliff. "This, sir, is all your fault! If I perish, my death will lie at your door!"

"Mr. Ratcliff!" exclaimed the shocked Head.

"If you hadn't told me it was imperative that I should improve my temper, I should never have bought this person's poisonous preparation!" roared Ratty. "And now I've got to die in agony—all because of you!"

"What about me?" moaned Skimpole. "Violent internal pains are beginning to assail me; my cerebral apparatus is feeling agitated! Help!"

"My hat!"

"So this is the explanation, is it?" remarked Figgins. "Both Ratty and Skimmy took medicine to make them carry on differently, and—and—"

"And they got the right stuff at horse strength!" finished Tom Merry. "Great pip! Well, we know why they've been as they have been now!"

"Bai Jove! I suggest we send for a doctah immediately!"

"Please do, my dear D'Arcy!" gasped the Head. "In the meantime, Mr. Ratcliff and Skimpole, you must both go to bed."

"Groooooogh!"

"Kindly conduct Mr. Ratcliff to his room, Merry and Figgins! Blake and Herries! Please take Skimpole to the sanatorium and ask the nurse to give him an emetic."

"Yes, sir!"

The juniors hastened to obey the Head's commands. Mr.

(Continued on page 28.)

EXPLORING AFRICA BY AEROPLANE
IS JUST AS PERILOUS AS FOOTING
IT THROUGH THE JUNGLE.

CHICK CHANCE

Adventurer!

Crocodiles!

HOW Burk Roscoe came to be clinging precariously to the landing-carriage of the monoplane, with three thousand feet of space between him and the solid ground, was a problem that Chick Chance had no great difficulty in solving.

Roscoe had been standing right in the path of the machine at the moment when it had taken the air. Dropping flat to avoid the spinning propeller, he must have found himself caught up in the landing-gear, instinctively grabbed hold of the pontoon, and been too dazed to let go before the aeroplane had zoomed high over the tree-tops.

After that he had no option save to remain where he was. "Suffering cats, no wonder that bunch of native soldiers were kicking up such a shine, dancing about on their hind legs and pointing up at the plane!" muttered Chick. "And no wonder the blessed old crate has been flying all lopsided ever since it left the ground!"

"Would it not be possible," inquired Lobula, with grave interest, "to open the little window in the floor, and shoot the white man of exceeding wickedness so that he falls into the river?"

"The window doesn't open," informed Chick. "And that's not the only reason why I can't adopt your excellent suggestion. Roscoe is a pretty average skunk, and I don't think he'd be far short of plugging me if he got the chance; but I don't go in for that kind of thing. Hi, Herbert!"

Herbert came at once in answer to the summons that reached him via the speaking-tube that formed a line of communication between saloon and cockpit.

"Well, did you ever hear anything like it?" he exclaimed, when he heard the latest news. "I reckon there's jest one swab we don't want with us on this trip, and that's Roscoe. What are you going to do about it, Chick? D'you think if Horace was to loop the loop a couple o' times it would sort of let the beggar know as we ain't hankering after his company?"

"We can't murder the fellow in cold blood," said Chick quickly. "I don't suppose he's hanging on there for the fun of the thing. And he certainly can't be allowed to stay there!"

"Pity we can't pass him a spare parachute, and tell him to hop off as quick as he likes. He'd have a long walk to Lakola, and serve him dashed well right!"

Intentionally, or unintentionally, Burk Roscoe had once again placed the airmen in grave danger. His weight was responsible for the plane's erratic flying, by tipping the right wing and placing undue strain on the controls. Chick knew that there was only one thing to be done.

"We've got to land," he said resignedly. "And if we don't make a good landing Roscoe is liable to get his neck broken."

"I shouldn't lose a lot of sleep worrying about that,"



(For introduction see
page 26.)

By
**ROBERT
MURRAY.**

remarked Herbert, unfeelingly. "If we crash it'll be harps and haloes for the whole bunch of us. Land! Where the dickens are we going to make a landing?"

Chick was already on his way to the cockpit. Horace's jaw sagged, and the monocle popped out of his eye as he learned what was responsible for the persistent tipping of the plane's right wing.

"Suffering spiders, I thought we'd seen the last of Roscoe!" he exclaimed, as he relinquished the controls. "The man's a perfect pest. You'll be running a big risk if you attempt to land, Chick. We might never get the old crate in the air again."

Chick glanced at the map, and then peered over the edge of the cowling at the ribbon of water far below.

"Won't be so much risk if we land on the river," he said shortly. "Good job we're fitted with floats as well as wheels. Roscoe'll be lucky if he gets off with nothing worse than a ducking."

He pushed forward the stick, and put the monoplane into a long, smooth glide. Forest, jungle, and stream seemed to leap up towards them. He levelled out again at five hundred feet, and scanned the surface with keen eyes.

The Ogopo was almost a quarter of a mile wide at this point, and the channel seemed free of rocks or sandbanks. The water ran yellow, and it was impossible to judge its depth.

Chick descended in wide, left-hand circles, to counteract the awkward dipping of the opposite wing. He knew that it was going to be a ticklish job to make a smooth landing with a lopsided heavily-laden plane. Never had his skill as a pilot been put to such a severe test.

Slowly he eased back on the stick, and switched off the roaring motor. The machine was travelling at fifty miles per hour, as the long, narrow floats skimmed the surface of the river, bounced once, and bit the water firmly at the second attempt.

Smoothly and steadily the monoplane glided along, and gradually came to rest, with a dead stick and lazily swaying wings. She was clear in mid-channel, with her nose pointing downstream.

"Good work, old son!" applauded Horace admiringly. "That's what you call a perfect two-point landing. If you'd been carrying a load of Chinese eggs you wouldn't have cracked one of 'em."

Chick dashed the perspiration from his eyes and jumped from his seat to crane his head and shoulders over the edge of the cockpit. A gasp of consternation escaped him as he stared downwards. The right-hand float was bare. Burk Roscoe had disappeared!

"By gosh, he's gone!" exclaimed Horace shakily. "That last dive must have blown him off his perch!"

"Hey! Look—look!"

It was a shout from Herbert that attracted their attention. He had his head thrust through one of the windows in the fuselage, and was pointing excitedly towards the tail-end of the monoplane.

Twenty yards away a black head was bobbing above the yellow waters of the river, while two arms rose and fell in jerky, hurried strokes.

"It's Roscoe!" yelled Chick. "He must have been thrown off with that first bump when we struck the water. Get ready to—"

His voice died away in a strangled cry of horror that was echoed by the harsh scream of fear and distress that Burk Roscoe sent ringing across the water. The man was swimming with the strength of a maniac.

"Great haddocks! What's the matter with the fellow?" exclaimed Herbert, puzzled. "Got the cramps, or is he afraid o' missing the boat?"

Chick's face went suddenly white. His gaze was fixed on two V-shaped ripples, which had appeared on the surface of the river, some distance in the rear of the swimming man. At the apex of each was an evil, black snout, that was cutting through the water like a miniature motor-boat. Splash! Splash! Half a dozen inert objects that looked like rotten, mud-encrusted logs, slid down the shelving bank of the stream and plumped heavily into the water.

"Crocodiles!" exploded Herbert, his voice shrill with horror. "Swarms of 'em! Jest look at the filthy brutes! By heavens, he's a goner, Chick!"

Burk Roscoe was still a dozen yards from the floating plane, and the nearer of the evil saurians was about the same distance away from him. But it was travelling at twice the pace of the madly-swimming man, bearing down upon him like a torpedo-boat in pursuit of a labouring tramp-steamer!

It was fortunate for Burk Roscoe that the plane had drifted broadside on to the tide, and the stock of the swivel-mounted machine-gun was within six inches of Chick Chance's cheek.

In a flash he had grasped it, swinging the blunt muzzle round while his thumbs fumbled for the trigger-trips. It was a case for accurate marksmanship. To hit the nearest crocodile he would have to aim less than six inches over Roscoe's bobbing head.

Rat-tat-tat! The sharp yelp of the Lewis awakened a hundred echoes in the surrounding forest. The first burst went high, but the next hail of steel-nosed bullets found their target with telling effect. With its head ripped to ribbons the scaly monster rolled over on its back and sank like a stone.

But the second crocodile was now within a few feet of Roscoe as, with a last desperate effort, he reached the plane, and, grasping the float, strove wildly to drag himself out of danger.

Again Chick took quick aim and pressed his thumbs to the triggers. There was no response—the gun had jammed!

The giant saurian raised itself half out of the water, its ugly, fanged jaws gaping wide open to seize its prey. For the second time that day the diminutive Herbert rose to the occasion.

With a wild yell he craned his head and shoulders through the narrow window in the fuselage of the plane and hurled a round, black object clean into the crocodile's wide-open mouth.

The great, yellow-toothed jaws clashed shut like the slamming of a steel lift-gate. Slowly the monster sank out of sight, and at the same instant Burk Roscoe got a firm grip on one of the steel struts and drew himself upwards until he hung half in and half out of the lofty cockpit. Boom! There was a dull explosion, and a fountain of

yellow, crimson-stained water leaped high in the air. The shredded remnants of a once healthy and hungry crocodile were scattered far and wide over the surface of the river!

"Crumbs!" exclaimed Horace, in an awed voice, as the plane rocked and swayed to the force of the explosion. "Wot sort of a pill was that you gave the old croc, Herbert? It weren't a No. 9, was it?"

"It was jest a Mills' bomb," informed his chum carelessly. "I wouldn't mind betting that's taken his nastiness, greedy appetite away. Eugh, look at the brutes!"

The remaining crocodiles were fighting and snapping over the shredded remains of their companion. A minute later there was not a ripple to disturb the face of the waters.

Chick Chance drew a deep sigh of relief. His jaw hardened as he turned to face Burk Roscoe.

"That was a narrow squeak," he said calmly. "You know, one of those machine-gun bullets actually grazed the top of my head."

Chick's cheeks flamed with anger.

"You may wish it had been aimed a bit lower before I've finished with you!" he snapped grimly. "By gosh, Roscoe, I've half a mind to sock you in the jaw and fling you back into the river!"

"My dear fellow, don't make rash threats!" drawled Roscoe imperturbably. "I can assure you I had no desire to inflict my company on you, but now that I'm here I suppose I've got to make the best of it. Got such a thing as a cigarette?"

The man's impudence was astounding. Horace snorted, and doubled his fists.

"Chick, what about going ashore and letting me have jest five minutes alone with this gink?" he pleaded. "I'll soon wipe that sneer off his clock! I'll—"

"Switch off!" jerked Chick. "You're a pretty low type of skunk, Roscoe, and I should be treating you better than you deserve if I was to put you ashore and let you fend for yourself. I don't quite know what to do with you."

"There's only one thing you can do—take me with you," suggested the man blandly. "I can assure you I'm just as interested in the problematical whereabouts of Eustace Latimer as you are."

"I'll bet you are!" scoffed Horace, glaring through his monocle. "If he's still alive I suppose you'd like to find him and make certain that he's dead? Don't grin at me! You know wot I mean."

"Don't talk to the skunk, Horace," said Herbert reprovingly. "He ain't fit company for the likes of us. He's that low he'd kick a snake in the stomach. I'm sorry now as I went and blew that poor crocodile inside out."

Roscoe's face suddenly paled, and he shrank back, a look of dire fear in his shifty eyes. Staring fixedly at him from the interior of the saloon was the grim, black countenance of Lobula, the man whom he had attacked and left to die in the forest beyond Lakola.

"Keep him away! Don't let him touch me!" whimpered Roscoe fearfully. "He—he attacked me once before, and I had to hit him on the head and tie him up!"

"You're not only a craven cur, but a liar as well, Roscoe!" snapped Chick contemptuously. "You tried to murder Lobula in order to prevent him from guiding us to where Eustace Latimer was last seen. Get inside there!"

Unwillingly Roscoe stepped through the narrow door into the saloon. The presence of Lobula seemed to have knocked

all the courage and bombast out of him, and he submitted quietly to the ordeal of being searched. Nothing was found on him save a heavy automatic that was packed in a shoulder-holster.

Lobula's eyes rolled, and his white teeth gleamed in a delighted grin as Chick handed him the pistol.

"Keep an eye on this treacherous snake, Lobula," instructed the young airman, with a wink. "If he attempts any funny tricks, shoot him. Great Scott! What's happening now?"

The plane had suddenly commenced to pitch and toss, and sway violently from side to side. Herbert uttered a shout of alarm as he rushed out into the cockpit, and Chick's heart commenced to pound as he peered through the window in the fuselage.

The big monoplane was no longer motionless. It was careering along in the grip of a fierce current, and the wooded banks of the river were streaming past in a dizzy whirl.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,160.

HOW THE STORY STARTED.

CHICK CHANCE, late Flight-Commander Chichester Chance, R.A.F., V.C., D.S.O., is rescued after a crash by Herbert and Horace, late air-mechanic and pilot-sergeant of Chick's old squadron. Later, they meet Howard Paige, who asks Chick if he will fly to Central Africa to look for a Professor Latimer, who has come into a fortune of half a million pounds, but does not know it. If Latimer does not return within three months the money is to go to Burk Roscoe, an arrant scoundrel. Chick agrees to go and to take Herbert and Horace with him. Reaching Lakola, the three chums fall foul of Roscoe, who, assisted by a squad of native soldiers under the command of Major Vigon, tries to steal their plane and murder Lobula, a native guide who alone knows where Latimer is. The enemy are eventually driven off and Chick "takes the air," only to discover some time later that Roscoe is clinging precariously to the under-carriage of the plane.

(Now read on.)

Then there came a sudden violent shock that flung Chick and his companions from one end of the saloon to the other. The whole plane seemed to stand clean on end, and a wave of foaming yellow water came pouring through the open windows!

The Falls of Tombi!

OVERWHELMED by the torrent of yellow water that came foaming through the narrow windows, Chick Chance was swept clean off his feet and sent floundering from one end of the monoplane to the other.

He landed head first against the sharp edge of a heavy box of ammunition. The blow knocked him silly, and he lay for several moments with a wonderful display of shooting stars and flaming meteors sizzling before his eyes.

Drenched to the skin, and conscious of an enormous and extremely painful bump over one eye, he managed to clutch hold of one of the swing chairs and drag himself to his feet.

To his surprise and relief the influx of water had ceased, and the floor of the saloon had resumed its normal, horizontal position. Horace sat in one corner, blinking his eyes rapidly, and clutching at his nose as though he feared that it was about to take permanent leave of him.

Lobule was the only one who seemed not to have been in the least degree alarmed or perturbed by what had happened. He was seated comfortably astride of Burk Roscoe's recumbent form, holding the muzzle of his recently-acquired automatic pistol within an eighth of an inch of its late owner's twitching nose.

"White man!" threatened the big black fellow solemnly. "You show me any funny tricks, and I shoot you right in the leg!"

"Suffering scorpions, he must be a rotten shot!" exclaimed Horace, in a muffled voice. "Look where he's jolly well aiming! Ten to one he doesn't know the first thing about that gun he's got in his hand."

"Take—take it away from him!" spluttered Roscoe, his eyes bulging with terror. "Are you going to allow this black scoundrel to murder me in cold blood, Chance?"

Chick shrugged his shoulders carelessly as he pursued an erratic course towards the door leading to the cockpit. He knew that the automatic was harmless; he had taken the precaution to remove the magazine before he had presented the weapon to Lobule.

It was an alarming sight that met his gaze as he emerged in the open air. When the big monoplane had first landed on the Ogopo there had been scarcely any current at all. But since then the machine had drifted around a sharp bend in the river, and was now in the grip of a fierce rush of water that was sweeping it along at a dizzy pace.

The river had narrowed perceptibly. The wall of forest on either bank seemed to draw closer together with every second that passed.

"Bit suddenlike, this!" blurted Herbert, who was nursing a nasty cut in his right cheek, evidently caused by a fall against the steel mounting of the machine-gun. "Seemed to strike a blessed millrace jest as soon as we got round that bend. Did you feel a bit of a bump a while back?"

"Feel it?" echoed Chick, his face grim with anxiety. "It nearly shot me through the roof! I thought the plane had barged into a submerged rock, and turned turtle. What happened?"

"Struck a sandbank," explained Herbert. "We stuck tight for a moment, and the rush of water behind swept clean over the top of the fuselage. That tilted the old



Just as the gaping jaws of the huge crocodile opened to seize its prey Herbert let fly with the bomb!

bus forward and floated her clear. I don't like the look of this, Chick. If we hit another sandbank it'll tear the floats clean off the bus. What's that queer booming noise I can hear?"

Chick Chance cocked his head alertly on one side. His eyes narrowed, and the lines of his jaw hardened as he listened. Faintly in the distance he could hear a dull roaring like the passage of a railway train on a still winter's night. But there were no railway trains in that part of Africa, and the temperature was somewhere round about a hundred and ten in the shade.

"Hear it?" queried Herbert uneasily. "Seems to be getting louder and louder, and it's dead ahead. Sounds to me like Christmas! Wot's the matter now?"

A sharp cry escaped Chick's lips, and his bronzed face suddenly went white as he bent and stared at the map that was fixed on the instrument-board. His finger trembled as he slowly traced the course of the River Ogopo on the sheet of glazed linen.

"By heavens—the Falls of Tombi!" he exclaimed huskily. "The biggest known falls in Africa, with the exception of Victoria Nyanza!"

"Falls?" echoed Herbert vaguely. "You mean a sort of waterfall, like they have in some parts of Devonshire?"

"I mean falls like Niagara, only about three times the size!" Chick snapped, staring at the smooth, yellow flood of water that was whisking the monoplane along like a paper-boat in a brimming gutter. "Millions of tons of water plunging headlong over a six-hundred-foot precipice into a foaming cauldron, studded with rocks as big as St. Paul's. That's the Falls of Tombi, old son, and we're heading straight for it at a speed of twenty miles per hour! If we can't get this old crate into the air within the next ten

minutes you can take it from me that you'll have wings of your own the next time you do any flying—perhaps!"

Louder and louder sounded the thunderous roar of the mighty torrent of water that for countless centuries had been sweeping over the foaming lip of the vast cataract that was now known as the Falls of Tombi.

Chick knew that the place could not be many miles ahead, and the aeroplane was being carried along at a speed that certainly did not give them more than ten minutes in which to evade the terrible peril that lay in wait for them.

The river ran in a smooth, swift flood that denoted a considerable depth of channel, and a probable absence of further sandbanks or shoals. The tree-lined banks had given way to sheer walls of rock that flung back the sullen echoes of the distant falls.

"This wouldn't have happened if it hadn't have been for that swab, Roscoe!" muttered Horace, when the situation was explained to him. "There's one thing about it—he's in the same boat as we are in now. If we go under he's coming with us!"

"We're not going under!" snapped Chick fiercely. "Will you get out and swing the prop, or shall I do it, Horace?"

The lanky airman answered this question by swinging himself over the edge of the cowlings, and clambering down on to one of the floats. There he clung precariously by one hand, while with the other he reached for the dripping blade of the tractor-screw.

"Contact!"

Horace gave a pull that almost shot him headlong into the river. The motor spluttered once and died gasping. The prop swung idly to and fro. Again and again Horace swung it round, but without result.

Chick set his teeth as he tested the throttle and glanced at the pressure-gauge. There was nothing wrong with the feed-pipe. The defect was in the engine itself.

The roar of the falls now boomed like thunder in their ears. The very atmosphere quivered to the crash of tumbling waters. Herbert had to shout to make himself heard as he knelt on the edge of the cowlings and squirted petrol into the water-logged carburettor.

"Stick it, Horace!" he yelled encouragingly. "Another pin may do the trick! Give her the throttle, Chick!"

The engine spluttered and coughed, faltered for a moment, and then burst into its deep-voiced song of speed and power. The steel-bladed prop hummed and gleamed like the wings of a hovering dragonfly, and Horace uttered a shout of triumph as he hoisted himself back into the cockpit.

(What lies beyond that wall of spray Chick and his chums haven't the foggiest notion! But they're determined to take the one chance offered. Don't miss next week's gripping instalment whatever you do.)

SKIMPOLE THE SUPER-MAN!

(Continued from page 24.)

Mix, after a brief conversation with the Head, wandered off again. Dr. Holmes, having again surveyed his ruined study with a kind of fascinated stare, stalked away to Mr. Ratcliff's room. And the crowd finally dispersed, buzzing with excitement.

The mystery of Mr. Ratcliff's change of heart and Skimpole's amazing boldness was at an end. But it was likely to be a long time before St. Jim's ceased to marvel over the affair!

Neither Mr. Ratcliff nor Skimpole perished, as the dolorous Mr. Mix had feared. After a day or so in bed, during which they developed all sorts of alarming symptoms, they got up unharmed. The symptoms apparently, had been merely the products of their respective imaginations, and they suffered no more ill-effects from Mix's celebrated mixtures.

Both, on recovering, were a little anxious as to what would be the Head's attitude towards them after that unprecedented scene in his study.

To their great relief, the Head passed it over altogether. Possibly because he felt that he was, in a way, partly responsible, Dr. Holmes never again made reference to the matter.

With the sudden cessation of their tonics, came an equally sudden cessation of the peculiarities which had characterised Skimpole and Mr. Ratcliff for the preceding two days.

Skimpole, at one fell swoop, returned to his old dreamy, feeble ways, while Mr. Ratcliff, as Figgins ruefully put it, became more like himself than he had ever been before!

In his first hour abroad again Skimpole allowed a Third Form fag to knock off his cap, ran for his life from a solitary New House junior, and swooned at the sight of a "scrap."

As for Mr. Ratcliff, within five minutes of his leaving bed he had boxed the "boot's" ears, given out half a dozen impots, and caned a couple of juniors for laughing at him.

It was "as you were" with a vengeance. And on reflection, most of the fellows felt glad that it was so.

Skimpole and Mr. Ratcliff, during the two days in which they had been under the influence of the "dope," had certainly added to the gaiety of St. Jim's. But there was a general feeling of relief at the knowledge that St. Jim's had not lost for good the dithery, dreamy genius and the sarcastic, sharp-tempered curmudgeon that had existed before Mr. Mix's marvellous mixtures had affected them!

THE END.

(Be sure and read: "HELD TO RANSOM!" next week's ripping story of Tom Merry & Co. You'll vote it a real topper!)

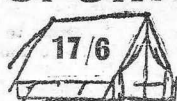
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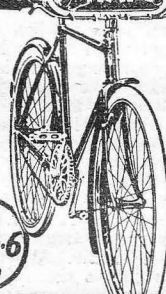
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