

"SKIMPOLE THE SPARTAN!" This Week's Grand Story of St. Jim's!

The GEM 23



The Freak!

WEAR A SACK! DO WITHOUT FURNITURE AND SIT ON THE FLOOR!

CHAPTER 1.

Astonishing the Natives!

"HALLO, hallo! What—"
 "What on earth—"
 "What is it?" yelled
 Monty Lowther, completing the unfinished question of Tom Merry and Manners. "What in the name of thump is it?"

The Terrible Three of the Shell at St. Jim's halted outside their study and fairly blinked.

They had just been punting a football about in the quad, and were returning for tea. As they reached the door of No. 10, the door of No. 9 had opened, and a figure had stepped out into the passage.

Tom Merry and his chums stared at that figure in blank amaze.

"It's an animal!" gasped Manners.

"Can't be—it's wearing shoes," said Tom Merry decidedly. "But what—"

"It's Skimpole!" howled Lowther suddenly. "Skimmy, in a sack! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Great pip!"

Tom Merry and Manners stared at Lowther, then stared at the figure. Then they roared.

Skimpole, the genius of the Shell, was a weird-looking youth at any time. His bony frame and massive forehead and deadly serious face had been known to excite mirth when he was dressed in the most conventional and unobtrusive garb. But now he was attired in a manner that was strikingly unconventional and extremely obtrusive. All that Skimpole wore was a sack in which holes had been cut for his arms and legs, and a pair of shoes. That was all; but the effect was really remarkable. The Terrible Three yelled.

Herbert Skimpole blinked at them for a moment through his big spectacles. Then he ambled off down the passage. He was carrying a weighty book under his arm, and from the intense expression on his lean face it appeared probable that he had been reading that weighty book. Skimpole marched off, wrapped in thought—and very little else!

"Skimmy!" gasped Tom Merry. "Half a mo!"
 "Stop him!" gurgled Manners. "Oh, my hat! There'll be a riot if he's spotted!"

"Jever see anything like it?" demanded Lowther. "What's his idea?"

"Give it up! Kim on, anyway!"

And Tom Merry led the way after the disappearing genius. Manners and Lowther followed.

As they reached the landing they heard a sudden yell from the foot of the stairs.

"Look out!"

"Help! What's coming?"

"It's—it's Skimmy!"

The Terrible Three caught a glimpse of Skimpole strolling dreamily along, immersed now in the weighty volume which he was reading as he walked. They hurried down the stairs.

Jack Blake and a crowd of Fourth-Formers met them at the bottom and greeted them with a roar.

"Who let him out?"

"Why don't you Shellfish look after your loonies?"

"Bai Jove! I weally considah, Tom Mewwy, that Skimpole ought to be medically examined."

"Can it, you idiot!" laughed Tom Merry. "Skimmy's THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,193.

SKIMPOLE



not really as bad as that. There's some explanation of this bizney, and we're going to get it from him."

"We'll come, too!" grinned Blake. "In, chaps—there's no charge!"

The Fourth crowd fell in behind Tom Merry. Quite a lot of others joined up, too, in the course of the next minute. It was quite easy to follow Skimpole, for the genius of the Shell was leaving behind him a trail of hysterical spectators.

"After him!" yelled Herries.

"Stop him, somebody."

"Catch him befoah he gets downstairs, boys!"

A whooping crowd surged down the second flight of stairs, reinforced every moment by excited juniors whom Skimpole had passed.

They reached the passage leading into the Hall without overtaking their quarry. Cutts and Gilmore and St. Leger of the Fifth were standing in the passage, their faces blank. Tom Merry called out to them.

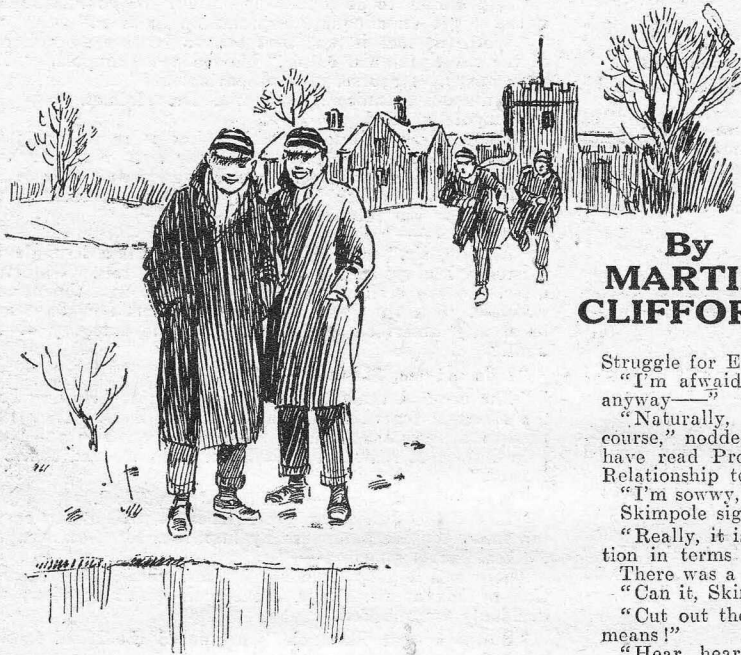
"Seen Skimpole?"

"By gad! I should think we have!" gasped Cutts. "Couldn't very well miss him. He's gone into the Hall. But what the thump—"

The juniors rushed past the astonished Fifth-Formers without waiting to explain—not that they were in a position

THIS IS THE GREAT NEW SPARTAN PLAN! SKIMPOLE'S UP THE POLE!

the SPARTAN!



By
**MARTIN
CLIFFORD.**

Struggle for Existence'?"

"I'm afraid I haven't, deah boy; I weally fail to see, anyway—"

"Naturally, my good youth, you would fail to see, of course," nodded Skimpole. "I presume, however, that you have read Professor Knotalthare on 'Environment in its Relationship to the Survival of the Fittest'?"

"I'm sowwy, deah boy, but—"

Skimpole sighed.

"Really, it is difficult to know how to render an explanation in terms that are likely to prove intelligible to—"

There was a roar from the excited juniors.

"Can it, Skimmy!"

"Cut out the dictionary stuff and tell us what this sack means!"

"Hear, hear!"

Skimpole nodded.

"I will endeavour to do so as briefly as possible. If you fellows are prepared to give me your close attention for a couple of hours or so—"

"Fathead! A couple of minutes is enough!" grinned Tom Merry. "You've turned out in a civilised school dressed in a blessed sack, and unless you're balmy—"

"He is!"

"Unless you're balmy, there must be a perfectly simple reason for it," finished Tom. "Let's hear it, Skimmy; and make it snappy!"

"My good youth—"

"Chuck it!"

"Get on with the washing, old chap!"

"I will endeavour to compress my remarks into as small a compass as possible. In the first place—"

"Cave!" came a sudden whisper from the back of the crowd.

"It's the Head himself!"

"Oh crikey!"

"From the first days of organic life," proceeded Skimpole dreamily, "there has been a struggle for existence, resulting in the survival of the fittest. In that Whoop!"

connection, one may say—

The learned remarks of the genius of the Shell suddenly ended in a yell as half a dozen pairs of hands grasped him. A moment later Skimpole found himself sitting on the floor, with somebody's cap stuffed into his mouth. With great presence of mind the juniors adopted the only possible means of getting him out of sight and out of the hearing of the Head.

Dr. Holmes, the venerable Head of St. Jim's, looked across at the crowd and the juniors faced him rather breathlessly.

"Good-afternoon, sir!" ventured Tom Merry respectfully. "Good-afternoon, Merry. You appear to be holding a meeting."

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to explain much, in any case. They entered the Hall. Then there was a yell.

"Here he is!"

"Collar him!"

Skimpole had stopped. He was standing in the middle of the Hall, his massive head bent over his book, quite oblivious of the sensation he was causing.

Tom Merry and his followers tore across the Hall and surrounded him breathlessly.

"Got you!" said Tom. "Now for explanations!"

"What's the big idea, Skimmy?"

"Explain, ass!"

Skimpole looked up with a start.

"Dear me! What is the meaning of all this commotion, my good youth?" he asked mildly. "If some disaster is imminent—"

"Fathead! Tell us all about it!"

"If there is a likelihood of the School becoming enveloped in flames—"

"There isn't—not the slightest!" grinned Tom Merry.

"The only disaster I can foresee is the disaster that will happen to you if one of the Beaks catches you in this rig-out! Why have you done it?"

"If you are referring, my dear Merry, to the habiliments I have chosen to don this afternoon—"

"I am, sir!"

Skimpole blinked solemnly at the Junior Captain of St. Jim's.

"Dear me! I must be gifted with some strange gift of prophetic insight. Something told me before I came out of my study that my appearance might be the subject of comment on the part of the unenlightened masses!" "Something told him!" murmured Lowther faintly. "Oh, help!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The unorthodox and the unconventional usually do arouse atavistic instinct and archaic resentment in the minds of the ignorant, my dear friends," said Skimpole gravely.

Skimpole's got another "—ism!" This time it's neo-Spartanism! Hardships are the order of the day—and no bedclothes the order of the night! Read this priceless, long complete yarn of Tom Merry & Co. of St. Jim's!

"Hem! Not exactly, sir. It's a sort of discussion——"

"Pewwaps I had bettah explain, Tom Mewwy. We asuah you, sir, it's quite a twivial affaih——"

"A noisy gathering of fifty or so in the Hall would hardly appear to be a trivial affair, D'Arcy. Are you endeavouring to conceal something?"

"Weally, Doctah Holmes——"

"I fancied I saw a sack, or something resembling a sack—dear me! It is moving!" exclaimed the Head. "Pray move away at once, boys!"

"Oh crikey!"

"Please, sir——"

"You see——"

"Stand away at once!" ordered the Head sternly, advancing into the centre of the crowd. "Why, bless my soul! It is an animate body! It—it is a human being!"

"Gerooosh!" came a strangled cry from Skimpole as he struggled to rid himself of the cap.

The Head bent over the struggling figure in the sack. Simultaneously, by an unlucky chance, Skimpole pulled out the cap and jumped to his feet. The result, to the horror of the onlookers, was that the massive forehead of the genius of the Shell smote the Head's chin with a fearful concussion.

Crack!

CHAPTER 2.

The Spartan Spirit!

"Y AROOOOOP!"

"Ow! Oh!"

Thus Herbert Skimpole and Dr. Holmes respectively.

Skimpole staggered back, both hands held to his head. Dr. Holmes executed a sort of war-dance, his chin clasped in an affectionate grip.

"Ow! I am sorry, my good sir!" gasped Skimpole, recovering his equilibrium. "It would appear that my head came into juxtaposition with your chin."

"Oh! Undoubtedly that would appear to be the case!" said the Head. Then, for the first time, he took a good look at Skimpole. "D-d-dear me! Skimpole——"

"I assure you, it was an act of inadvertence on my part——"

"Skimpole!" roared the Head.

"Unfortunately, when two bodies meet at such considerable velocity——"

"Skimpole! Boy!"

"The results must necessarily be painful and——"

"Boy!" hooted the Head. "Wretched youth! How dare you!"

"Oh!"

Skimpole ceased his verbal analysis of the accident. His mighty brain suddenly deduced that something else besides that occurrence was agitating the Head.

Dr. Holmes' expression as he gazed at Skimpole was quite extraordinary.

"What—what—how dare you!" he stuttered. "What is the meaning of this inexcusable behaviour, wretched boy?"

"I—I—your own meaning, my good sir, if I may say so, is beyond my comprehension——"

"I am referring, Skimpole, to the ridiculous garb in which you have had the recklessness and temerity and audacity to——"

"Oh! You mean, sir, that you take exception to the habiliments I have chosen to wear?"

"Exactly. What explanation have you to offer, Skimpole? If, indeed, an explanation of such abominable behaviour is possible!"

Skimpole blinked.

"I regret, Dr. Holmes, that your remarks are somewhat beyond my comprehension at the moment. How it is possible to characterise my behaviour as abominable——"

"What other word can I use, boy, to describe your disgraceful appearance? So far as one may judge, you are at present clothed in a sack, like some barbarous inhabitant of a cannibal island——"

"Pardon, my dear sir, but I cannot agree to that description! Far from being a savage, I am the most enlightened scholar at St. Jim's. It is possible, my dear sir—more than possible, in fact—that I am considerably more enlightened than yourself!"

"Help!" moaned Monty Lowther, while a gasp went round the listening crowd.

Dr. Holmes grasped Skimpole by the scruff of the neck and shook him until his unclad knees were knocking together.

"Enough of this nonsense, Skimpole! I demand that you give me some explanation. How did you come to as-

sume this preposterous dress? Did some foolish practical jokers force you to wear it?"

"Ow! Nunno! Nothing of the kind, sir!" gasped Skimpole. "I donned it purely of my own volition. I was a free agent entirely, I assure you!"

"This extraordinary prank, then, is your own handiwork?"

"No. I mean, yes. That is to say, sir, it was not a prank at all!" stuttered the genius of the Shell. "The fact is——"

"I am waiting, Skimpole!"

"The fact is, it is a very serious matter indeed——"

"It promises to be extremely serious for you, Skimpole, unless I get an adequate explanation quickly!"

"Well, the fact is, sir, that I have become an adherent of the neo-Spartanist cause!" blurted out Skimpole. "You have heard, of course, of neo-Spartanism?"

"N-n-neo-Spartanism?" stuttered Dr. Holmes.

Skimpole nodded.

"The modern philosophy which aims at returning to the standards of ancient Sparta, my dear sir. Well, sir, that is the philosophy which I have adopted; and that is the philosophy which has led to my adopting a sack as my raiment for the future!"

"But—but——"

"All life, sir," said Skimpole gravely, "is a struggle for existence leading to the survival of the fittest. Unfortunately, modern civilisation has largely obscured the natural struggle, with the result that the survivors nowadays may be mostly described as belonging to the category of the unfit."

"I do not see, Skimpole——"

"The neo-Spartanists, Dr. Holmes, aim at bringing back the struggle for existence into civilised lives. They propose to achieve that aim by introducing severity and hardship into lives rendered unfit by easy living and excess of luxury."

"My—my dear boy——" stuttered the Head.

"Life at St. Jim's, my good sir, is at present too easy—too soft. We are pampered by luxurious food, extravagant clothes, lavish quarters——"

There was a gasp from the juniors. Skimpole's description of life at St. Jim's, from their point of view, was decidedly exaggerated.

"But, my dear Skimpole," murmured the Head faintly. "Surely you do not mean——"

"What I mean, sir, is, that for the future I intend to adopt the Spartan ideal in my daily life, undergoing as much hardship as I possibly can. To that end, I have decided, in the first place, to discard the luxury of ordinary clothes and wear a simple sack instead. Hence my present appearance."

"Oh!" gasped the Head. Simultaneously, there was an audible "Oh!" from the rest.

The mystery of Skimpole's amazing change of clothes was ended. The cat was out of the bag. Skimpole was wearing sackcloth simply because he wanted to lead a Spartan life!

"Well, my hat!" said Tom Merry.

"Bai Jove!"

The juniors fairly blinked at the genius of the Shell.

Dr. Holmes drew a deep, deep breath.

"Then you are wearing this—this extraordinary raiment, Skimpole, because you wish to return to the standards of Sparta?"

"Precisely, my good sir!"

"Extraordinary! Amazing!" muttered the Head, half to himself. "You are quite sure, my boy, that you are well? You do not feel feverish—have no reason to suppose that your mental faculties are disturbed?"

"None whatever, my dear Dr. Holmes!"

"Then all I can say, Skimpole, is that your behaviour is very eccentric!"

Skimpole frowned.

"I gather, sir, that you do not find yourself in agreement with the ideas I have outlined?"

"That is most certainly the case. I consider your ideas utterly ridiculous and absurd, Skimpole!"

Skimpole drew himself up to his full height, and blinked solemnly at the Head.

"In that case, sir, if you do your duty, you will flog me with the utmost severity. I trust, as a matter of fact, that you will, for the leniency of the modern schoolmaster is resulting in the complete demoralisation of the youth of to-day. Flog me, sir, I beg of you!"

"M-m-my hat!" stuttered Herries. "Well, I've heard of chaps asking for it before, but not quite like this!"

"Not quite, bai Jove!" chuckled Arthur Augustus.

"Silence!" boomed the Head. "Now, Skimpole——"

"You wish me to go to your study? Very well. I assure



As Dr. Holmes bent over, Skimpole jumped to his feet. His massive head smote the Head's chin with a fearful concussion!

you, sir, that I will bear any punishment you inflict on me with Spartan fortitude!"

"But I do not intend to flog you, you foolish, misguided boy!" hooted Dr. Holmes. "It is clear to me now that I am dealing with a case, not of insubordination, but of amazing mental ineptitude, which I certainly do not propose to punish with a flogging. You will write me fifty lines, Skimpole."

"With pleasure, my good sir. Nevertheless, I am of opinion that—"

"And you will discard that absurd garb at the earliest possible moment, and put on your usual school clothes. You understand?"

"I comprehend exactly, sir; but I venture to suggest that—"

"Dear me! The boy appears to be not completely in possession of his faculties. See to it that my orders are carried out immediately, Merry!" said Dr. Holmes. And with that he beat a hurried retreat, looking quite agitated.

Skimpole was apparently a little too much for the Head of St. Jim's!

CHAPTER 3.

Skimpole's Feed!

"WELL, of all the chumps—"

"Of all the chuckle-headed idiots—"

"Of all the footling, fozzling fatheads—"

"You're the greatest!" finished Tom Merry.

"Skimmy, old bean, you've got all the freaks that ever freaked licked to a frazzle!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry & Co. and a crowd of School House juniors were walking by the river. Rounding a bend, they had come upon a strange sight. In front of them lay a swimming pool, frozen over, surrounded by trees which were weighed down by the snow which festooned their branches. Standing on the spring-board, in an attitude which suggested that he was about to plunge in, but feared it might be too cold, was Skimpole, the Freak of the Shell, wearing only a pair of shorts!

Hence the remarks of amazement.

Skimpole looked up and frowned.

"I fail, my good youths," he remarked gloomily, "to perceive any justification for risibility."

"Good old dictionary!" grinned Manners. "But I suppose, Skimpole, that you will chuck this Spartan stunt after what the Head said this afternoon?"

Skimpole blinked.

"I shall certainly do nothing of the kind, my dear Manners. If you imagine for a single moment that a trivial incident like this can deter a convinced neo-Spartanist like myself, you are most gravely mistaken. I have raised the Spartan standard at St. Jim's, my friend, and I do not intend to rest until I have achieved victory!"

"Exce-e-el-sior!" sang Gore.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Be warned in time, my good youths!" said the genius of the Shell, blinking round at the grinning crowd. "Soft living and too much comfort have been the undoing of many a generation before you. You may be going the same way. We are living in the lap of luxury—"

"Dashed if I've noticed it!" said Glyn warmly. "If that currant-pudding they served up for dinner is luxury, gimme something else!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Heedless of the perils which luxury may bring in its train," said Skimpole, with owl-like gravity, "let me tell you what Professor Balmcrumpet says in the three hundred and fortieth chapter of—"

"Here, stow it, old bean!"

"Give old Balmcrumpet a rest, and tell us all about this victory you're going to achieve!"

"Yes, what exactly is the aim, Skimmy?" asked Tom Merry.

Skimpole cleared his throat before replying. Skimpole always did behave as though he were on a platform addressing a public meeting.

"The aim, my dear Merry," he said, "is the abolition of luxurious and pampered living at St. Jim's. That is why you find me here, about to break the ice and plunge my body into this freezing water. It is hardships such as this which make us men."

"Well, anyway," said Lowther, "if Skimmy's head gets through the ice it will make a hole big enough for the rest of him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That is only one of the minor reforms. There are other items on my programme of far greater importance. The abolition of furniture, for example—a most important matter!"

"Eh?"

"You want us to abolish furniture?" howled Kangaroo. "Where the thump do you think we're going to sit, then?"

"On the floor, my good youth!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Or more preferably on the grass outdoors, or on the branch of a tree, or on the roof of the House!" said the genius of the Shell seriously. "The Spartan existence demands that one lives as far as possible in the open."

"So we've got to live up in the trees like a lot of monkeys?" gasped Gore. "That it, Skimmy?"

"Quite, my dear Gore!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Shell roared. They found Skimpole's novel ideas extremely entertaining. There was not a suspicion of a smile, however, on the face of the Spartan. He continued to regard his hilarious colleagues with the utmost seriousness.

"Really, my good youths——" he protested.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Stop talking, or I'll bust!" choked Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail altogether to observe any occasion for mirth," said Skimpole. "If you continue in this fashion, my dear fellows, I shall find it a matter of exceeding difficulty to render the rest of my programme intelligible to you. But I have a proposal to make to you. Supposing you all partake of comestibles as my guests——"

"Eh?"

"Then you can listen to my exposition on neo-Spartanism while obtaining nutriment from the edibles I shall offer you. Does the idea appeal to you, my good youths?"

"Appeal to us?" echoed Kangaroo. "You mean you're actually inviting us to a feed so that you can talk to us about this back-to-Nature bizney?"

"Exactly! I have decided that perhaps I should injure myself unnecessarily by attempting to break my way through this ice. I shall return later with suitable implements. For the moment I would suggest that we return to the school buildings."

"Best thing you've said to-day, Skimmy!" said Gore. "Didn't know you were in funds, old scout."

Skimpole smiled faintly, and proceeded to put his clothes on.

"I am not in funds, as you colloquially express it, my dear Gore."

"Then how the merry dickens are you going to stand us all a feed?"

"The explanation, my good fellow, is that I have already provided myself with a sufficiency of edibles, in anticipation of this affair."

"You've laid in a stock of tuck? Well, that's pretty decent of you," remarked Manners genially. "Where can we eat, though? Your study won't hold us all."

"I was about to suggest the Common-room, in point of fact."

"The Common-room it is, then!" said Gore. "Come on, you men! I'm hungry!"

"Buck up, Skimmy!"

"Lead on, Macduff!"

"Follow me, my good youths!" said Skimpole amiably, when he had finished dressing.

The Shell brought up in the rear with great enthusiasm. An invitation to a feed at tea-time was not to be sneezed at, even though it did involve having to listen to Skimpole on neo-Spartanism.

Most of them were surprised, as well as enthusiastic. Skimpole was not a particularly gregarious youth, nor was he very well supplied with pocket-money. As a result, the occasions when he invited guests to tea were few and far between. Yet here he was extending an invitation to the whole Form!

"Can't make it out!" remarked Tom Merry to Manners, as he followed the genius of the Shell out of the dormitory. "Skimmy must have come into a fortune to be able to carry on like this."

"Perhaps that explains the whole bizney," grinned Manners. "He's come into money, and it's turned his brain!"

"Reserve judgment till we see what sort of a feed he's dishing out!" advised Kangaroo. "Hallo, hallo! Here's Baggy!"

"Wonder if he didn't nose out a feed!" snorted Gore,

glaring at the Falstaff of the Fourth, who had just rolled into view. "Buzz off, barrel!"

"I say, you chaps, if it's a feed——"

"Scat!"

"One moment, my good youths!" interrupted Skimpole, as half a dozen juniors made to grab Trimble. "Trimble may come, if he wishes."

"Oh!"

"Well, if you say so, Skimmy——"

"There will be plenty of comestibles for everybody, my dear fellows," said Skimpole cheerfully. "Pray let the youth join in; in fact, the rest of his Form-fellows may come, too, if they wish!"

"M-m-my hat!"

Trimble fell in triumphantly. The procession carried on almost dazedly.

By the time they reached the Common-room their numbers had swollen tremendously. The glad tidings spread with surprising rapidity, and the Fourth joined in with a rush when they heard they were all invited.

"Where's the tuck?" asked Gore, drawing Skimpole on one side of the door of the Common-room.

"I have left it in the study, my good youth."

"Ye gods! And I was wondering where tea was coming from!" grinned Gore, who shared Study No. 9 with Skimpole and Talbot. "Shall I give you a hand with it, old bean?"

"I should feel deeply grateful. There is a considerable weight of foodstuffs to be carried."

"So I should jolly well think, if you're going to feed this army!" chuckled Gore. "Kim on, Skimmy!"

"I'll come along, too," said Talbot good-naturedly.

Skimpole and his two study-mates departed, and the buzzing crowd settled down, crowding out every part of the Common-room.

In less than five minutes the three occupants of Study No. 9 were back, each carrying a huge hamper before him. Their arrival was greeted with a loud cheer.

"Good old Skimmy!"

"Who'd have thought 'it of him?"

"He's laid in enough to feed a regiment!"

"I say, Skimpole, old chap, shall I help you to undo 'em?" gasped Trimble, whose little eyes were almost starting out of his bullet head with excitement. "I won't touch anything till the spread's all set out, of course!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Falstaff of the Fourth didn't wait for Skimpole's answer. Before he had even completed his own question his podgy fingers were wrenching open the top of the hamper which Skimpole had deposited on the floor.

The top swung open, and Trimble fairly dived into the hamper, bundling out with eager haste the packing that was inside.

At least that was what it appeared to be, though it was somewhat unusual packing, consisting, as it did, of hay and even a certain amount of fresh-looking grass.

"My hat! When do we get to the tuck?" asked Jack Blake, staring at Trimble's growing pile of hay in astonishment.

Skimpole's answer made his guests jump.

"That, my dear Blake, is the tuck!"

"Eh?"

"Not all of it, of course," Skimpole hastened to add.

"There are other varieties of foodstuffs in the other two hampers."

"But——"

"But, my dear chap——"

"All I can see is hay," remarked Tom Merry. "I suppose you haven't invited us here to eat hay, Skimpole?"

"Yes I have, my good youth!"

"Wha-a-at!"

It was a howl from Skimpole's guests.

"Hay, my dear friends, is a fine, natural, strengthening article of diet," said Skimpole calmly. "I have decided that to attain the Spartan ideal it will be necessary to go back to fine old pastoral foods like hay!"

"So it's a Spartan meal you've asked us to, is it?"

"Precisely, my dear Dane! A meal of great simplicity, yet of immense nutritive value!"

"You—you——"

"Hay!" moaned Herries. "Oh, help!"

Baggy Trimble, whose podgy face had gone quite white, touched Skimpole on the arm.

"W-w-what's in the other two hampers, then?" he quavered.

"That question, my good Trimble, is easily answered. One contains raw potatoes and the other bird-seed!"

"Raw potatoes?" yelled Blake. "Oh, my giddy aunt!"

"B-b-bird-seed!" babbled Digby. "Bird-seed, you know!"

Skimpole's guests looked at Skimpole, then looked at each other.

Then there was a roar.

CHAPTER 4.

Figgins Lends a Hand!

"SCRAG him!"
 "Squash him!"
 "I say, you chaps, go for him bald-headed!" came an anguished plea from Trimble. "The rotter brought us here—"

"With the promise of a feed!" hooted Crooke.
 "And now he offers us bird-seed!" shrieked Kerruish.
 "Bird-seed and hay and raw potatoes! Scalp him!"
 "Scrag him!"

There was a rush. After their first shock the Terrible Three, and Talbot and D'Arc and Cardew, and quite a number of the others had smiled. Their smiles broadened into grins, the grins changed to a laugh, and the laugh eventually became a roar. So, while those juniors whose disappointment had temporarily overcame their sense of humour surrounded Skimpole, the rest stood by, rocking with laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Really, my good youths—" protested the flustered genius of the Shell.

"Collar the idiot!" sang out Gore.
 "Bump him!"

"Roll him round the room!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"

"My dear, good fellows, I utterly fail to observe— Yaroooooh!"

Bump!
 Skimpole went down with what a novelist might describe as a sickening thud. A moment later half the Shell and the Fourth were piling on top of him.

Skimpole gave vent to a series of half-suffocated howls.
 "Ow! Help! Wow! My good youths— Geroooooh!" he finished up, as Trimble added his enormous weight to the heaving mass of humanity.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Manners. "Skimmy will come out like a newly pressed suit by the time they've done with him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Rescue him!" almost sobbed Tom Merry. "Oh dear! Raw potatoes, you know!"

"Bird-seed!" choked Cardew. "An' new-mown hay! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Let's save him, anyway, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with a rather anxious glance at the struggling heap on the floor. "To the wescue!"

"What-ho! Pile in!"
 They "piled in," almost helpless with laughter as they were. Tom Merry seized Trimble and yanked him off. Arthur Augustus grabbed Gore. Cardew allowed himself to depart from his customary aloofness to the extent of grasping Hammond firmly by the ears and leading him to the other side of the Common-room.

Trimble, who was not pugnaciously inclined, accepted the position and rolled out of the Common-room in quest of tea in Hall.

Gore and Hammond, on the other hand, rushed back again for vengeance. Many others, who had been similarly assaulted, followed their example. The result was that in the space of a few minutes a wild and whirling battle was in progress.

Naturally, such large-scale warfare could hardly have lasted long without attracting the attention of someone in authority. Kildare very quickly put in an appearance at the door of the Common-room, and Mr. Railton, the House-master of the School House, arrived soon after. Both carried canes, and both proceeded to wield them among the combatants with great vigour.

A series of wild yells rang through the Common-room.
 "Ow! What is it?"

"Yaroooooh! Lemme alone!"
 "Whoooop! Oh crikey!"

"Cave!"
 "Oh dear! It's Railton!"

"Silence!" ordered Mr. Railton sternly.
 "Oh! Certainly, sir!"

"With pleasuah, deah boy! I mean, Mr. Wailton!"
 "Have you all taken leave of your senses?" demanded the Housemaster.

"Nunno, sir! You see—"

"I am at a loss to imagine any other reason for such riotous behaviour! Why, goodness gracious! Is that Skimpole?" finished Mr. Railton, in surprise, as his eyes

fell on the dusty and dishevelled figure of the genius of the Shell.

"Ow! Oh dear! Your statement is perfectly correct, my good sir!" gasped Skimpole. "I regret most sincerely that I should have been the cause of this unseemly commotion."

Mr. Railton jumped.
 "You are taking the blame for these riotous proceedings on your own shoulders, Skimpole? But surely—"

"I am afraid, my dear Mr. Railton, that I can do nothing else. I confess that I did not anticipate that by inviting the fellows to a meal I should be provoking harsh words and fisticuffs."

"You invited all these boys to a meal?" exclaimed the astonished Mr. Railton. "I can only remark, Skimpole, that you chose singularly ill-mannered guests! But I still fail to understand—"

"Precisely, sir. I fail to understand myself why the youths should exercise truculence on my offering them fine nourishing hay—"

"What!"
 "And raw potatoes and bird-seed of most excellent quality."

"You offered your guests hay and raw potatoes and bird-seed?" gasped Mr. Railton. "Are you mad, boy?"

"Quite the reverse, my good sir, I assure you," answered Skimpole, with dignity. "The foodstuffs I have mentioned are of incalculable value in producing in human beings certain Spartan qualities—"

"D-d-dear me! I think I begin to understand a little!" said Mr. Railton, his face relaxing a little. "Dr. Holmes has already mentioned to me an incident which occurred in the Hall half an hour ago. It appears, Skimpole, that you have embarked on a campaign in favour of a return to Spartan conditions?"

"Exactly, sir!"
 "Well, my hat!" remarked Kildare.

"This—this meal, then, Skimpole, was what might be termed a Spartan meal?"

"Precisely, my good sir! If I might explain—"

"Thank you, Skimpole, but I think I understand already! You will write me out fifty lines."

"Dear me! I do not quite comprehend."

"The rest of you will perform the same task," said Mr. Railton. "Any more noise and there will be trouble, boys!"

"Oh!"
 "Thank you, sir!"

And Mr. Railton turned on his heel and vanished through the doorway, with Kildare hard at his heels. The juniors thought they heard something from the passage outside that sounded suspiciously like a laugh, though they could not, of course, be certain that the mighty Housemaster and the lordly school captain had displayed amusement in such open fashion.

"Well, that's that!" grinned Jack Blake. "And now, having declined Skimpole's hospitality, I think we'll get along and have some grub!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "As to this Spartan stunt, Skimmy, the sooner you bury it the better for all concerned!"

"Hear, hear!"
 "My good youths—"

"Stow it! Chuck it! Give it a rest!" advised Jack Blake. "A joke's a joke, but we've had enough of this one, old chap. If you don't mind, we'd sooner not learn any more about Spartanism! Think it over, Skimmy!"

"My dear fellow—"

But Blake had already departed, and the rest were not slow in following him. So Skimpole was left to waste his sweetness on the desert air.

But the last of neo-Spartanism had not been heard of at St. Jim's. Herbert Skimpole, once he got going, was a very determined youth, and he really had got going this time. Even as he ambled away from the Common-room fresh schemes were already forming in his mighty brain for bringing the Spartan ideal right to the forefront at St. Jim's.

A scheme was also forming a little later in the brain of another St. Jim's junior—George Figgins, the leader of the New House juniors, to wit.

Figgins heard of Skimpole's latest when he called to discuss an approaching inter-House footer match with Tom Merry.

There was a keen look in Figgins' eyes, and a lurking smile round his lips, when he left Tom Merry's study. After a moment's hesitation he looked in at No. 9.

Luck was with him. Skimpole was alone in the study, immersed in a ponderous volume, the mere sight of which made the New House leader feel headachy.

Figgins smiled, and nodded amiably.

"Busy, old bean?"

"Good-evening, my good youth! I am somewhat occupied, but—"

"Shan't keep you half a sec!" said Figgins, closing the door behind him. "It's about this Spartan stunt—"

"You desire me to enter into an explanation?"

"No; couldn't think of troubling you to that extent, What I really wanted to do was to offer a suggestion."

Skimpole smiled a gracious, if somewhat sceptical, smile.

"It is very kind of you, my dear Figgins. Pray go on!"

"What about doing without bedclothes?" asked Figgins gravely. "Jolly good idea, what?"

"A truly excellent idea, my good youth. I have already explained to several of the fellows that if they would only go without bedclothes they would become as strong and hardy as supermen. Unfortunately—"

"Unfortunately, they won't take your advice, eh?" finished Figgins, with a sympathetic nod. "They're a very dense lot; I've noticed it before."

"Dear me! You display signs of more intelligence than I had given you credit for!"

"Why, you silly ass—I mean, exactly; just so, old bean!" corrected Figgins hastily. "Now, this is just where my idea comes in. If they won't go without bedclothes voluntarily, why not do the silly asses a good turn by forcing 'em to go without?"

"I'm afraid I do not precisely comprehend."

Figgins sank his voice to a whisper.

"Go up to the dorm half an hour before the rest, Skimmy, and take the bedclothes off before they get there! Leave 'em a sheet each, say, and cart all the rest up to the nearest box-room. Then they'll jolly well have to be Spartans! Get me?"

Skimpole's eyes gleamed behind his big spectacles.

"Dear me! The scheme certainly has merits, my good youth!"

"Merits! Why, it would get top marks and the first prize anywhere!" said Figgins. "The chaps may grumble a bit at first—"

"I was just contemplating that possibility, my dear Figgins!"

"But when it leads to their becoming what-names—Spartans, you know, and supermen," said Figgins, with owl-like gravity, "they'll thank you from the bottom of their hearts! Go in and win!"

"Dear me! I almost think I will!" said Skimpole, blinking solemnly at the leader of the New House. "Many thanks, indeed, for your advice, Figgins!"

"Don't mensh! Well, I must buzz now," said Figgins hastily, as the sound of footsteps drew near the study. "Ta-ta, Skimmy—and the best of luck!"

And the wily New House junior dodged out before Talbot and Gore came in, and went his way, whistling with great cheerfulness.

CHAPTER 5. Not Spartans!

KNOX shepherded the Shell to bed that night. Knox, who was rather free in his use of the ashplant, was the sort of perfect it paid not to offend, and the Shell were, therefore, on their best behaviour. There was one junior, however, who was not at first among the crowd. The junior was Herbert Skimpole.

"Where's Skimmy?" asked Tom Merry, as Knox left them for a minute to go along to the Fourth dormitory. "Not gone to sleep on the roof, I hope?"

"He'll find it pretty chilly to-night if he has," grinned Monty Lowther. "The roofs are white with frost. I'd give the average Spartan about two minutes of it before he came down again!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Funny thing, though," remarked Bernard Glyn. "I fancy I did see him lugging a pile of bedclothes or something up the box-room stairs as I came along. Surely the idiot hasn't—"

"All serene; he hasn't. Here he is!" grinned Tom Merry.

"Buck up, Skimmy!"

"Ware the Knox bird! Better get undressed!"

Skimpole trotted in, nodding absently in response to the juniors' chorus of greeting. He stared a little as Monty Lowther made a mock obeisance before him.

"Hail, Sparta!" cried Monty.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Really, my good Lowther—"

Lowther jumped to his feet again, wearing a look of owl-like gravity, and gripped the genius of the Shell by the arm.

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"Look here, Skimmy," he said, in a thrilling stage whisper, "if you feel like a dorm feed to-night, I've been out collecting some fine, nourishing tuck. I've got some holly-leaves and seaweed, and some tip-top firewood logs. And if you feel like a drink there's plenty of blue-black ink—"

"But, my good fellow, I seriously doubt the wisdom of drinking blue-black ink—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the Shell delightedly.

"I fail to see, my good youths—"

"Cave! Knox coming!" sang out Manners, whose bed was near the door; and there was a rush to get between sheets.

A moment later there was a yell from almost every junior in the dormitory.

"What the thump—"

"Who the dickens—"

"Where on earth—"

"Why—"

"My blankets!" hooted Gore. "Who's collared my blankets?"

"Same here! Chuck 'em over, somebody!"

"What about mine?" yelled Kangaroo. "Look here, if this is a jape—"

"Now then, what's the merry row?" came Knox's unpleasant voice from the doorway at that moment. "Why aren't you in bed, Skimpole?"

"The precise circumstances, my dear Knox, are that—"

"Well, never mind. Bend over— Here, what are you young sweeps getting out for?" finished Knox, turning his attention temporarily to the rest of the Shell. "Get back into bed at once!"

"Go and eat coke!" retorted Clifton Dane.

Knox jumped.

"What—what— Why, you cheeky young rat, I'll—"

"You'll find out what's happened to my bedclothes before I get back!" snorted Clifton Dane. "Think I'm going to sleep with one sheet over me on a frosty night like this?"

"Think I am, either?" demanded George Alfred Grundy.

"Because, if you do, Knox, you've made a thumping big mistake. I'm not going to!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Nor I!"

"Silence!" roared Knox above the swelling tumult. "Get back into bed, all of you! How should I know what's happened to your blankets? Do you good to go without 'em, anyway; you kids get too much mollycoddling, in my opinion—"

"Ease up, old bean!" broke in Tom Merry. "It's a pretty cold night, you know, and we can't very well be expected to manage with one sheet apiece. I don't intend to, anyway."

"Not likely!"

The Sixth-Former scowled.

"How many blankets are missing, then? Can't you share out what are left?"

"We can't."

"And why not, pray?"

"Because there aren't any!" answered Tom sweetly; and there was a chuckle from the Shell, which Knox's baleful glare soon silenced.

"This means, I suppose, that one of your cheap humorists has been playing games!" remarked the prefect sourly. "Well, whoever he is, he's going to get into hot water over it—I'll see to that. Stay here."

"Br-r-r! It's cold!" said Manners, with a shiver.

"Can't we dress again, Knox?"

"Anyone I find dressing will get this ashplant round his hide!" was Knox's ungracious reply. "Stay here. I'm going to fetch Railton."

"Yes; but—"

Slam!

Knox had already departed, slamming the door with a slam that rattled the dormitory windows.

"Portrait of a perfect gentleman!" remarked Clifton Dane, with a grin. "I fancy we're postponing a little sporting game of poker, or something of the kind. Br-r-r! It's cold!"

"Kik-kik-kik-cold, isn't the word!" remarked Glyn.

"Br-r-r!"

"Oh dear!"

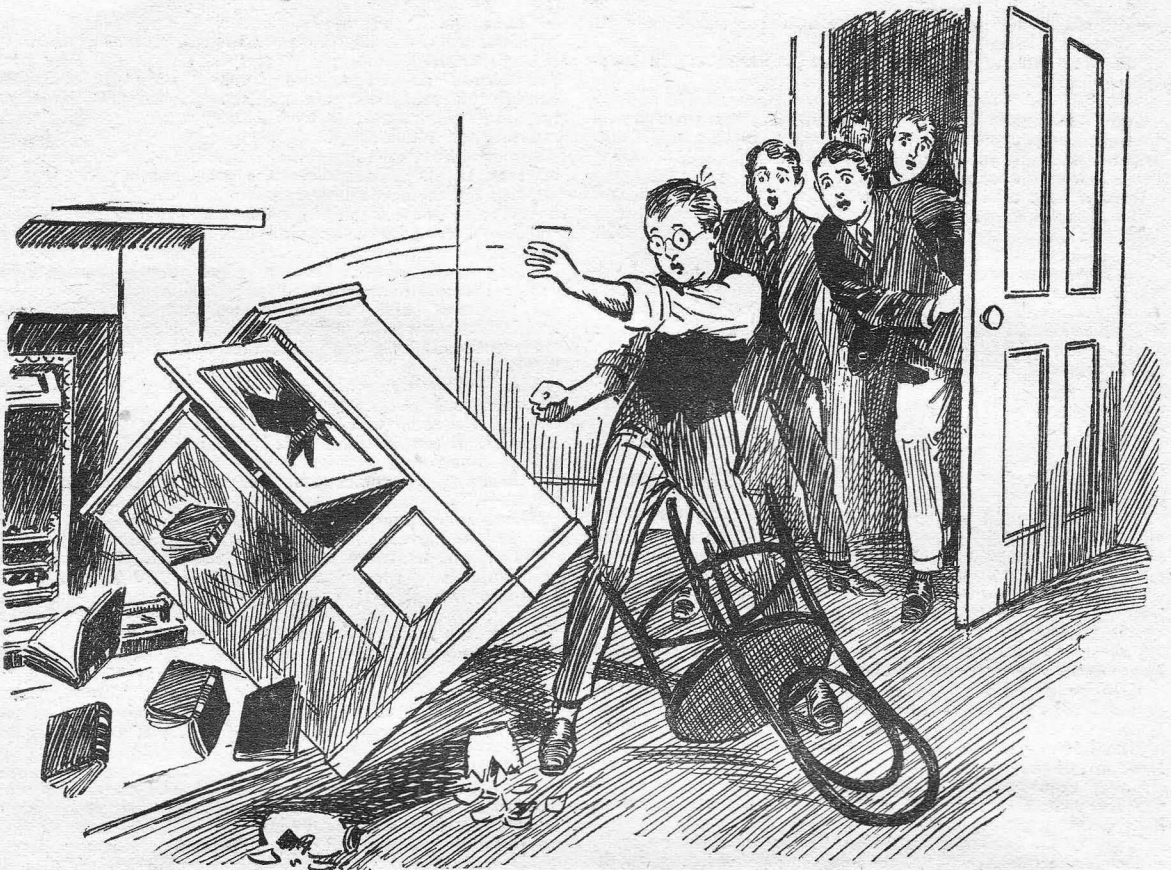
"Ah-shooo!"

"Br-r-r!"

The Shell juniors were beginning to find their pyjamas poor protection against the frosty air of the dormitory. Several started to swing their arms against their shoulders, cabman fashion, but even that was not particularly stimulating.

Skimpole, the only fully-dressed junior in the dorm, blinked at the shivering juniors rather reproachfully.

"Really, my good youths, I am a little concerned, I must



As the bookcase went flying, the door opened and a crowd of juniors rushed in.

confess, to find you complaining at this trifling inconvenience. Arctic explorers—"

"Blow Arctic explorers!" roared Grundy. "I'm kik-cold—jolly cold! Ugh!"

"Br-r-r! Same here!" said Kangaroo, between chattering teeth. Then the Australian junior had a brainwave. "Who says a game of leapfrog while Knox is gone?"

"The very idea!" grinned Tom Merry. "Nobody can complain if we try to save ourselves from catching cold. Go to it!"

There was a rush to join in the game, and in the space of a few minutes the Shell dormitory was witnessing the very unusual sight of a rollicking game of leapfrog.

Bump! Crash! Thud!
"Tuck in your tuppennies!"
"On the ball!"

"Keep your nappers down!"

Round and round the centre of the dorm went the enthusiastic players, until everyone was glowing and the cause of the game was almost forgotten.

Then the door opened again, to admit Mr. Railton and Knox, and operations were hurriedly suspended.

Mr. Railton stared a little dazedly at the animated scene.

"What—what—how dare you—"

"We were trying to keep warm, sir," explained Tom Merry. "No sense in catching cold, is there?"

"Then what Knox has told me is true?" exclaimed the Housemaster. "Your blankets are missing?"

"Yes, sir; all of them."

"Extraordinary! Frankly, Knox, I could hardly credit your story at first; but I can, of course, see for myself now." Mr. Railton's brow was thunderous as he turned to the juniors again. "Some practical joker has been at work here, boys. I demand to be told if any of you know anything about it?"

The juniors shook their heads.
"Nothing whatever, sir," said Tom Merry. "First I knew about it was when I got into bed."

"Same here!"

"My dear Mr. Railton—"

Mr. Railton frowned on Herbert Skimpole, who had stepped forward.

"Yes, Skimpole; no irrelevancies, please, or you will be punished."

"I assure you, my good sir, that my conversation is never

irrelevant," said Skimpole, blinking solemnly at the stern-visaged Housemaster. "If you have ever, by any chance, read Professor Balmcyrumpet's book on—"

"Has the book anything to do with these blankets?" demanded Mr. Railton, in a voice that was deadly calm.

"Certainly, sir. All things in the universe are inter-related, as you will appreciate if you have perused Professor Knotalther's scholarly essay on—"

"Boy!"

"Oh! Yes, my good sir!"

"Do you or do you not know where the missing blankets are?" hooted Mr. Railton. "I order you to answer me in a monosyllable—yes or no!"

"Dear me! In that case, my dear Mr. Railton, the answer is 'yes'!"

"Oh, my hat!" breathed Monty Lowther. "It's Skimmy!"

"Phew!"

Mr. Railton glared at Skimpole with an almost homicidal glare.

"Since you know, kindly tell me where they are—at once!" he added, as he observed Skimpole's lean face take on the dreamy expression that usually pointed to his going off at a tangent.

"Yes, sir—with pleasure, my dear Mr. Railton!" gasped the genius of the Shell. "They are in the box-room!"

"The box-room, eh?" remarked Mr. Railton. "Pray tell me how you came to possess this information, Skimpole."

"That, my dear sir, is easily told. I put them there myself!"

"You—you—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a roar from the juniors. They really couldn't help it. Mr. Railton's expression as he took in the full meaning of Skimpole's calm announcement was, as Lowther afterwards put it, "worth a guinea a box!"

"Silence!" hooted the outraged Housemaster. "There is, I assure you, no cause for laughter in this absurd and reckless joke—"

Skimpole jumped.

"My dear sir, it was not a joke—it was done in deadly earnest—"

"You have the impertinence, Skimpole, to tell me that this amazing action was not a joke?" gasped Mr. Railton. "In that case, what was it?"

Skimpole's expression as he answered was like unto that of a graven image.

"It was an experiment, sir—an experiment in neo-Spartanism!"

"Oh!"

The "Oh!" was from the juniors. It was as clear as daylight to them now. Evidently it was clear also to Mr. Railton, though, judging by his expression, enlightenment had not brought forgiveness.

With a look that spoke volumes Mr. Railton turned and quitted the dormitory. Knox followed him, and after a moment's hesitation, the juniors followed Knox. All met at the door of the box-room.

There was no need to ask whether Skimpole had told the truth. Every available bit of space in the box-room seemed to be piled high with blankets. There were blankets on the floor, blankets on the little table by the window, and blankets all over the boxes.

"Dear me!" said Mr. Railton.

That was all he seemed capable of saying. He pointed silently to the blankets, and the juniors invaded the little room and gladly retrieved their purloined bedclothes.

They were soon in bed after that. Only Skimpole remained out to utter a last protest.

"My dear Mr. Railton," he said, "I still beg leave to state—Ow-ow! Whooop!"

Mr. Railton had seized Knox's ashplant and put it to excellent use round Skimpole's form. And Skimpole decided to go to bed without further argument, and even to accept without protest the crowning indignity of his own blankets.

"You will report to me after breakfast to-morrow morning," said Mr. Railton as he finally quitted the room.

"Ow! Yes, sir!"

The footsteps of the Housemaster and the prefect died away down the passage. Skimpole sat up in bed.

"My good youths," he remarked, "I was resigned to opposition to my ideas from the authorities. But I confess I am disappointed in you. The conclusion I am forced to is that as yet you are not Spartans—nothing like Spartans! Let me tell you—"

But they wouldn't. Somebody whizzed a pillow across the room at that moment, and Skimpole's remarks ended in a quiet, gurgling sound.

Then, as the juniors turned the affair over in their minds, a chuckle arose from the beds—a chuckle which grew in volume till it was a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Which was the last thing they had to say that night, and really the most fitting thing that could have been said, on the subject of Skimpole's no-bedclothes campaign!

CHAPTER 6.

One Up To Figgins!

THERE was an air of expectancy in the Shell when they came down to breakfast next morning.

Nobody remembered the last time Skimpole had got into really hot water. The genius of the Shell was very much the impractical dreamer, and rarely descended from words to deeds. For that reason he hardly ever came into conflict with the powers that were at St. Jim's.

That he was in hot water now nobody doubted. Japers had carried out weird and wonderful japes before at St. Jim's, but never before had the most daring japer conceived the idea of denuding an entire dormitory of its bedclothes.

The strangest part about it was that from Skimpole's point of view it was not a jape. Skimpole regarded his attempt to deprive his Form-fellows of their blankets as a most serious piece of strategy in the cause of non-Spartanism. Which made it all the funnier in the eyes of the rest of the House.

The genius of the Shell took his place at the breakfast-table wearing a look of grim determination on his face. He realised dimly in the depths of his mighty brain that the Spartan cause at St. Jim's was, somehow or other, on its trial. He determined that it should not be let down by any lack of enthusiasm on his part.

The juniors realised the existence of that enthusiasm when Gore came in late. Gore, who was a sound sleeper, did that sometimes. He did it on this particular morning, and, as usual, Mr. Linton rewarded him with fifty lines.

That was Skimpole's cue. He pushed his plate on one side and stood up.

"Pardon me, my dear Mr. Linton—"

"Well, what is the matter, Skimpole?" asked the master of the Shell.

"I had hoped, my good sir, that you were not a victim of the prevailing sentimentality which revolts at corporal punishment. I see now that my hope was a vain one!"

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"Skimpole!" gasped Mr. Linton.

"Your duty, sir, if you do not wish to encourage slackness and degeneracy among your pupils, is to inflict corporal punishment on those who commit breeches of school discipline!" said Skimpole gravely. "I suggest that if you have any regard for Gore's future you will administer the severest possible caning!"

All eyes were on the genius of the Shell for the remainder of that meal. Skimpole, who was not usually an important figure in the Lower School, suddenly found himself a centre of interest on the part of the entire House.

Quite a crowd accompanied him after breakfast to Mr. Railton's study, but that circumstance stirred no particular emotion in his breast. Skimpole had very little regard for either the plaudits or the disapproval of what he termed the "masses," and the undisguised interest of the House in his interview with Mr. Railton left him unmoved.

He marched into the lion's den with a firm and steady tread.

Mr. Railton was waiting for him. There was a cane on Mr. Railton's desk which appeared also to be waiting for him. Skimpole blinked at the cane reflectively for a moment. Then he blinked at Mr. Railton.

"Good-morning, my good sir!" he remarked gravely. "Continuing my remarks at the point where I left off last night—"

Then, to Skimpole's astonishment, Mr. Railton reached forward and grasped him very firmly by the ear.

"You will continue nothing of the kind, Skimpole," he said quietly. "I have sent for you to talk to you, not to listen to you. Now, Skimpole—"

"But, my dear Mr. Railton, I protest—Ow!" finished the Spartan of St. Jim's as the Housemaster's grip on his ear suddenly tightened.

"You will kindly remain silent now, except when I ask a question," said the Housemaster sternly. "You are here this morning, Skimpole, principally to receive punishment for a most extraordinary prank—I refer, of course, to last night's episode in the dormitory."

"My good sir—"

"Silence! Apart from punishing you, I must also warn you as to your future behaviour. Yesterday, you began a systematic course of behaviour which I can only describe as eccentric. Judging by your behaviour this morning at table, you intend to pursue the same plan to-day."

"Most decidedly! You see, sir—"

"I see no reason for countenancing your undisciplined behaviour, Skimpole, and I shall listen to no excuses for it. I simply warn you that if it continues, the consequences for you may be very serious. You understand?"

"I comprehend your meaning with the utmost clarity, my dear Mr. Railton. At the same time, I protest—"

"That will do," said Mr. Railton. "Now bend over. I am going to punish you for last night's prank—punish you, I might say, with appropriate severity."

He reached for his cane.

Skimpole looked at the cane, then looked at the Housemaster.

"Very well, my dear sir," he said. "In the circumstances, I accept the position. As a firm believer in discipline, I agree to be caned. Cane me, my good sir, with as much severity as you feel justified in exercising. I assure you that I will bear my punishment with Spartan fortitude."

After which, Professor Balmeyerumpet's zealous follower submitted to the undignified and humiliating process of bending over.

A moment later Mr. Railton's cane descended.

Thwack!

Properly speaking, the budding Spartan should have treated that first cut with contemptuous indifference. That was certainly what he had intended.

But sad to relate, Skimpole found Spartanism in the concrete rather different from Spartanism in the abstract. Mr. Railton had a strong arm, and the cane he wielded was meant to hurt. The result was that instead of remaining bent over and indifferent, Skimpole shot upright, performed a wild, spasmodic leap into the air, and emitted an agonised howl.

"Ow-wow-ow!"

"Please remain still, Skimpole!" said Mr. Railton grimly. "Ow! Certainly, my good sir! I can endure anything with a Spartan spirit—Yarooooh! Ow!"

Thwack! went Mr. Railton's cane for the second and third times and for the second and third times Skimpole emitted more howls.

"Really, Skimpole, the noise you are making is dreadful," said the Housemaster, with a frown. "Kindly control yourself better!"

"Ow-wow! Most decidedly, my dear Mr. Railton," gasped the hapless Spartan. "I assure you I can put up with considerably more than—Whoooooop! Yarooooh!"

Not till Skimpole had received a dozen cuts did Mr.

Railton lay down the cane. By that time Skimpole's yells had become quite alarming and Mr. Railton was looking extremely hot and bothered.

"Now go!" ordered the Housemaster, pointing to the door. "And remember what I have told you, Skimpole!"

"Ow-wow! I will—ow!—give it my most careful consideration! I must nevertheless point out—"

"Go!" thundered Mr. Railton.

"Ow! Oh dear! Very well, sir, I will go!"

And Skimpole went.

A buzzing crowd met him at the end of the passage and greeted him with a roar.

"Here he comes!"

"Cheerio, Skimmy!"

"Good old Spartan!" grinned Monty Lowther, giving the groaning genius a thump on the back. "I suppose those yells we heard were yells of Spartan laughter, eh?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins, who had come over with the rest of the New House juniors for morning lessons, tapped the suffering Spartan on the arm.

"Sorry it turned out so badly for you, old bean!" he said sympathetically. "If I'd known you were going to get it so hot, I wouldn't have suggested—"

"Hallo, hallo! Where did you come in, then?" asked Tom Merry.

Figgins grinned.

"It was my idea," he explained. "I dropped in on Skimmy—"

"Eh?"

"And put it up to him as a Spartan that you School House softies—"

"We what?" hooted a dozen School House juniors indignantly.

"Needed reforming a little. This struck me as the best start Skimmy could make. Rather unfortunate that Skimmy should have got it in the neck; but it's one up to us, I fancy!"

"What-ho! Who's cock House now?" chortled Fatty Wynn. And response came fortissimo from his comrades:

"New House!"

The School House crowd stared at Figgins & Co. rather dazedly for a moment. Then, as though moved by a common impulse, they closed round the grinning leader of the rival House, dragged him down into the dust of the passage, rolled him over and wiped their feet on him and left him wondering dizzily what had happened, before his colleagues had time to organise effective opposition.

After which, the School House juniors went into classes feeling a little better.

CHAPTER 7.

The No-Furniture Campaign!

"GOOD OLD Skimmy!"

Thus Figgins and Kerr and Fatty Wynn of the New House in enthusiastic chorus as they ran into Skimpole in the quad on their way back from classes later that morning.

Skimpole was strolling along buried, as he usually was, in a ponderous tome. He looked up with a start at Figgins & Co's. boisterous welcome.

"My good youths, I trust you are not—"

"Out for House rags?" finished Kerr, successfully attempting to read Skimpole's thoughts. "Not likely! We're not out ragging Spartans, are we, Figgy?"

"No fear! Too interested in the movement for that!" responded Figgins. "Matter of fact, Skimmy, you're the very chap we were looking for, isn't he, chaps?"

"What-ho!"

"Just talking about you, old bean!" grinned Fatty Wynn. "Hard luck about that dorm. bizney last night!"

"Well, I must confess that matter did not work out satisfactorily. Mr. Railton—"

"Railton doesn't understand," said Figgins. "Best thing to do is, keep out of his way. There are plenty of reforms you can start without getting his back up."

Skimpole frowned thoughtfully.

"I am afraid, my dear fellows, that I find it difficult to see what I can do without provoking some sort of conflict with the authorities."

"Well, what about a campaign in your own study?" suggested Figgins. "They say charity begins at home; why not Spartanism, too?"

Skimpole shook his head sadly.

"I have already broached the matter to my study mates, Gore and Talbot. I'm afraid neither possesses that degree of intellectual development necessary to an understanding of neo-Spartanism."

"Exactly; brainless chaps, both, from what I've seen of 'em!" grinned Figgins. "But I wasn't really suggesting

that you convert 'em. My idea was to bring it home to 'em in a more practical way. Why not shift all their furniture out of the study while they're out?"

"Dear me! I fear, judging by their attitude over the bedclothes last night that they might take exception to such action on my part!"

"What if they do?" asked the New House leader blandly. "They won't lam you like Railton did, anyway!"

"Possibly not, but Gore is a somewhat rough fellow—"

"Well, reformers have to take risks, don't they?" argued Figgins. "And you know what the Spartan idea of modern study furniture would be? That it's all wrong—much too soft and comfortable, and that sort of thing!"

"Precisely. That, naturally, is my own opinion!"

"Then why not go ahead?" asked Figgins. "You failed over the bedclothes; but that should only spur you on to further efforts! If at first you don't succeed, you know—"

Skimpole blinked seriously at the New House leader.

"Really, Figgins, you are very encouraging. I confess that I was feeling a little despondent over my lack of progress when you approached me just now. Your words have stimulated me considerably. I think I will try this little experiment with the study furniture."

"Oh, my hat—I mean, that's the idea, old chap!" corrected Figgins hastily. "Don't thank me—it's a pleasure!"

"It is, after all, just possible that when Talbot and Gore are confronted with the stark simplicity and Spartan honesty of an empty study, they will be enlightened and join me in the march towards neo-Spartanism," said Skimpole. "You agree with me, Figgins?"

"Absolutely, old bean! As you say, it's just possible!"

"Precisely! I will do it!" said Skimpole, with sudden determination.

And parking his book under his arm, the genius of the Shell bowled off in the direction of the School House. A moment later he was surprised to hear something that sounded like a burst of half-suppressed laughter. He looked round quickly. But Figgins & Co. were regarding him with almost deadly seriousness, and Skimpole concluded that he must have been mistaken.

He went on to the House, leaving Figgins & Co. under the old elms in the quad to laugh till their sides ached.

Full of enthusiasm, the genius of the Shell went upstairs and made a bee-line for Study No. 9.

There was nobody at home. Skimpole took off his coat and rolled up his shirt-sleeves and set to work.

But this time history was not to repeat itself. The no-furniture campaign in the School House was not destined to enjoy the sensational success that had attended the no-bedclothes effort.

Talbot and Gore turned up in time to prevent that.

Quite a number of other Shell fellows turned up with them.

Probably the noise attracted them. Skimpole was an excellent theorist, but when it came to doing anything practical, he was inclined to be a little clumsy. The result was that his first efforts at depriving Study No. 9 of its furniture had ended in the bookcase being sent flying, and a couple of china ornaments being smashed to smithereens.

Then the door was flung open, and Gore, and Talbot, and Tom Merry, and Lowther, and Cyrus K. Handcock, and several others looked in.

"What the thump—!" said Gore.

"Skimmy! You utter ass!" gasped Talbot.

"He's breaking up the happy home!" grinned Lowther.

"Latest form of Spartanism, I expect!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Gore rushed in and grabbed the genius of the Shell by the scruff of his neck.

"My ornaments! What have you done with my ornaments?" he hooted.

"And my bookcase!" exclaimed Talbot wrathfully. "You've smashed a panel of glass and scratched the side—"

"Oh dear me! I am most regretful, my good fellows!" gasped Skimpole. "Wanton damage I certainly did not mean to cause. I was merely moving, you see."

"Moving?" shrieked Gore. "You were moving my ornaments? And where were you going to move them to?" Skimpole gasped.

"Ow! Pray let go of my collar, my dear Gore! It was my intention to move them to one of the box-rooms. Professor Balmycrumpet says—"

"Hang Professor Balmycrumpet! What's he to do with my ornaments?"

"Everything, my good youth! The professor is of opinion that modern furniture is too comfortable and extravagant, and results in degeneracy. With a view to returning to saner conditions—"

"Oh, my hat! More Spartanism!" groaned Tom Merry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I decided to move the furniture from this study and live for the future in healthy, Spartan simplicity. You comprehend the scheme, my dear fellows?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"You—you—"

"It did occur to me that you might not see eye to eye with me on the point," went on Skimpole. "But Figgins said—"

There was a sudden yell from the crowd in the doorway.

"Figgins?"
"That New House bounder?"

Skimpole nodded.
"Figgins has been very helpful. In point of fact, he was the first to put the idea into my head."

"Oh, my hat!"
"The—the deep bounder!" breathed Tom Merry. "He's deliberately scoring off the School House through Skimpole!"

"Or trying to," said Monty Lowther, with a grin. "We've nipped his wheeze in the bud, though, this time. Now it's our turn to get a bit of own back, I fancy, and show Figgy that School House is still cock House."

"Hear, hear!"
"But how?"

For answer, Monty turned to Skimpole.
"I suppose Figgins told you he was in favour of abolishing furniture—that so, Skimmy?" he asked.

Skimpole nodded.
"His remarks certainly seemed to imply that, my good youth!"

"Then why not help him by clearing out his own stuff?" asked Lowther, closing a warning eye to his colleagues in the doorway. "Figgy's a busy chap—far too busy to do it himself. If you do it for him, you'll be doing him a real good turn. At the same time, you can clear out some of the other studies in the New House. Jolly good idea, I call it!"

"Oh, great pip!" gasped Manners.
"But Figgins did not request—"

"Of course he didn't; he's too modest to worry you on his own account!"

"But—but how the thump can Skimmy manage a moving job in the New House?" demanded Gore. "He'd be scragged before he got up to Figgins' study!"

"Forgotten the House match this afternoon?" asked Lowther gently.

"Oh!"
"There won't be a soul in the building this afternoon for the best part of a couple of hours. Skimmy can have it to himself!"

"Dear me! Conditions are certainly in that case propitious," remarked Skimpole. "The question is, where am I to take the furniture?"

"Have it stored," was Lowther's unhesitating reply. "Do the job in style, old chap. Order a pantechnicon from Bayes & Co., of Wayland, and get them to store it for you!"

"Oh, my giddy aunt!"

The Shell juniors stared at Lowther rather breathlessly. For the moment the scheme seemed a little too wild.

"Aren't you going a bit too far, Monty?" asked Tom Merry.

Lowther winked again.

"All serene. This is just the sort of thing Skimmy can get away with. We can't; but Skimmy can. Savvy?"

"Oh!"

The juniors grinned and understood. If they themselves

took prime responsibility for a jape so daring as this, the consequences might be very serious indeed. Skimpole, however, came into a different category. His seriousness made him incapable, as the masters well knew, of a real "jape"; so that if he were caught, his offence would rightly be regarded as a misguided attempt to do good, inspired by his eccentric habits of thought.

"Well, my hat!" said Manners. "It's steep; but it might come off. What about the money part of it?"
Skimpole nodded solemnly.

"That thought had occurred to me, my dear Manners. With all the good will in the world, I'm afraid that my finances—"

"Don't worry, Skimmy; we'll see you through, if it means a whip round the Form. Won't we, chaps?" asked Lowther.

"Don't worry any, boys!" grinned Cyrus K. Hancock. "I'll see this through myself, if it costs a hundred bucks. Hold on to this, Skimmy!"

And the American junior detached several pound notes from his wad and handed them over to the genius of the Shell.

Skimpole examined them, then his lean face broke into a smile.

"Really, my dear Hancock, this is extremely generous of you! You have the satisfaction of knowing that this money will enable me to deal a great blow in the Spartan cause!"

"Then you'll go ahead with it?"

"Indubitably. I will telephone the removal contractors at once!"

With that, Skimpole pocketed the notes and fairly rushed out of the study, his eyes gleaming with excitement.

The juniors, left alone, looked at each other, then looked at Lowther.

"Well, if this comes off—" said Tom Merry.

"It will!" chuckled Lowther.

"Then things are really going to hum this afternoon! Imagine Figgy's face when he turns up after the match to an empty study! Ha, ha, ha!" concluded Tom, as he saw that entertaining picture in his mind's eye.

"Ha, ha, ha!" came an answering roar from the rest. And they were still chuckling half an hour later when they went down to dinner.

CHAPTER 8.

Getting a Move On!

"GOAL!"

"Played, Merry!"

A delighted roar of applause went up from the School House supporters round the ropes on Little Side. The inter-House match was in full swing, and Tom Merry had just netted the ball for his side in sparkling fashion, thereby giving School House a lead of one clear goal.

"One up to us!" said Monty Lowther, with satisfaction. "I rather fancy Figgins'll have something to think about after this match is over, my infants!"

"He'll have plenty more to think about after the match if Skimmy pulls off the moving job," grinned Gore. "Wonder how the fathead is getting on?"

Lowther's eyes turned towards the gates, and he chuckled.

"Don't all turn round at once; the van's down at the gates now. Mustn't attract the attention of the New House chaps, though."

Potts, The Office Boy!



"No fear!"

The School House juniors, with Lowther, looked round casually one or two at a time. What they saw at first was Taggles, the porter, apparently engaged in an altercation with Skimpole of the Shell, with two gentlemen in green baize aprons on the other side of the gates forming a sort of chorus to their duet.

"Taggles won't let 'em in," observed Manners, with a frown. "Makes it a bit awkward, doesn't it?"

"All serene; Skimpy has found a way!" said Clive of the Fourth.

And Skimpole had. By the simple process of pressing a ten-bob note into Taggles' horny palm, he had suddenly wrought a surprising change in the porter's attitude to the unauthorised pantechnicon. Clive saw Taggles touch his hat respectfully, and roll over to the gates, producing the key as he did so.

A minute later the big van was in the grounds of the school.

The juniors saw Skimpole talking to the gentlemen in green baize aprons, then the horses moved forward towards the New House, and the van was lost to sight among the trees.

"So far, so good," murmured Lowther, with relief. "None of the Beaks have spotted it so far, and as Ratty has gone out for a walk, there's no reason why any of 'em should."

"Played, Gus!" yelled Manners, at that moment, as Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sent in a fine centre from the wing. And the School House juniors temporarily forgot about Skimpole's no-furniture campaign, and turned their attention to the game again.

While they watched the struggle of the rival teams, Skimpole was dealing his great blow for neo-Spartanism.

The New House was deserted while the match was on, the juniors being at Little Side in full force, while the seniors were either playing in or watching the First Eleven game with Abbotsford. Mr. Ratcliff, the unpopular Housemaster of the New House, had, in accordance with his usual custom, gone for a walk to Rylcombe, so that no interference was to be anticipated from him.

As Skimpole had remarked earlier, conditions were propitious for the great coup.

The genius of the Shell watched the green-baize gentlemen provide their horses with sustenance to keep them quiet during the removal. Then he led the way into the House.

The men were looking a little mystified. One of them addressed Skimpole as they reached the Fourth Form passage.

"I s'pose this 'ere is all right, young gent?" he asked. "Wot I mean, we usually see one of the schoolmasters on jobs like this 'ere."

"Pray do not concern yourself, my good man. I am accepting full responsibility in the matter," Skimpole replied solemnly. "Whilst not at liberty to disclose the full circumstances, I can tell you that the work on which you are engaged this afternoon is of very great importance."

"Dessay it is, sir; but wot I mean—"

"It may interest you to know," said Skimpole, blinking at Bayes & Co.'s representatives, "that you are assisting in what is, to all intents and purposes, a complete revolution in the habits of civilised mankind. You have heard of neo-Spartanism?"

"Can't say I 'ave, young gent. Is 'e a film star?"

"Neo-Spartanism, my good man, is of the neuter gender.

It describes the modern attempt to get back to the physical standards of ancient Sparta. Professor Balmcrumpet says—"

"My heye! You do talk, young gent!" remarked Bayes & Co.'s man admiringly. "But wot's Professor Wot's-his-name to do with this 'ere move? All I want to know is, is this 'ere move on the level?"

"Not at all, my good man. You will have to take the furniture down several flights of stairs before you reach your van!"

The green-baize gentlemen looked at one another rather significantly. It occurred to them simultaneously that they were dealing with no ordinary schoolboy. The suspicion entered their heads that Skimpole was not, as they confided to each other afterwards, "all there."

That suspicion may have caused them to want to see the back of St. Jim's as soon as they could. At all events, they got to work very quickly after that, and made no more inquiries as to whether the removal was "on the level" or not.

Skimpole directed their operations, and even took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves and helped them.

Figgins' study was the first to be emptied. Then they turned to Study No. 5, which was shared by Redfern, Lawrence, and Owen; and after that to Study No. 2, which Clarke and Robinson occupied; and after that to Study No. 3, of which Digges and Pratt were the tenants.

By that time the van was pretty full. Skimpole mopped his perspiring brow, consulted his watch, and glanced towards the gates. Then he started. He had suddenly observed, coming through the gates, a lean figure which, despite his short-sightedness, he recognised as that of Mr. Ratcliff.

"Dear me! I think that will be all now, my good men!" he said, hastily donning his jacket again. "If you would like me to settle now—"

"That'll be three pound, young gent. If you'll lend me your fountain-pen—"

"Pray don't bother to write out a receipt; here is your money!"

And Skimpole handed over three of Handcock's notes and walked away rather quickly.

The gentlemen in the green baize aprons looked at each other again. One touched his head, and the other nodded expressively. Then they climbed up on the van and started off.

Down to the gates rumbled the heavily laden van. Mr. Ratcliff met it half-way up the drive and blinked. Then he raised one hand in a commanding gesture.

"Stop! I order you!" he called out. "I demand to know—Ow! Dear me! Whooop!"

The drive sloped a little at the spot where the Housemaster had halted, and apparently the green-baize gentlemen found it impossible to stop. Mr. Ratcliff, as a result, had to jump out of the way at the last moment; and, with his usual ill-fortune, he landed right in a puddle.

"Whooop!" shrieked Mr. Ratcliff. "Stop, I command you! I'll have you prosecuted! Stop at once!"

But Bayes & Co. were deaf to the voice of the charmer. The pantechnicon rolled and rattled on to the gates without even slowing up, passed through the open gateway, and disappeared down the lane.

And Mr. Ratcliff picked himself up and limped into the New House, muttering things which, fortunately, could be heard by no other ears than his own.

Wrong Number!



CHAPTER 9.
Ructions!

"TEA!"

"Hear, hear!"

"That'll put a better complexion on things, perhaps!" said Fatty Wynn, smiling rather wryly.

"Pity those School House bounders licked us."

"Well, if you hadn't let through three goals—"

"You mean, if you'd only scored three or four goals—"

"If Redfern had only tackled Tom Merry more—"

"Look here—" said Redfern warmly.

Figgins grinned.

"Peace, my infants! No good holding an inquest. They whacked us, and it can't be helped. See if we can't do better next time, that's all. I'm for tea, anyway!"

"All serene, Figgy!"

And the footballers smiled again, forgot their troubles, and followed their long-legged leader up the stairs to the Fourth passage.

Kerr glanced down at the stairs once or twice on the way up.

"Lot of litter about this evening," he remarked. "Some-one been moving furniture?"

"First I've heard about it," said Redfern. "There'll be a row if Ratty sees all this muck, anyway."

"Come to think of it," said Pratt thoughtfully, "I did spot a moving-van down at the gates this afternoon. But who is there to move?"

"Give it up. Hallo! What the thump—"

Lawrence, the speaker, broke off and stared in amazement at the landing they were approaching. The rest followed his glance. Immediately after, there was a yell from Redfern and Owen, Lawrence's study-mates.

"Our table!"

"And my best easy-chair!" roared Lawrence, recovering his powers of speech. "What silly ass has been turning out our furniture?"

"Well, my hat!" exclaimed Figgins in surprise. "There's quite a lot of stuff lying about. What's the game?"

"Looks as if there's been a lunatic at large!" grunted Fatty Wynn.

"Someone has been raiding the studies, for a cert, anyway," said Kerr. "Let's look into it."

The Scots junior hurried to study No. 4 and opened the door. Figgins and Wynn rushed after him, their faces rather anxious. All three peered through the doorway together. Then came a howl.

"What the thump—"

"Our stuff!"

"Our furniture! What on earth—"

"What's happened to it?" asked Jimson.

"It's gone! The whole lot's gone!" shrieked Figgins. "Not a stick left in the study! Look here—"

But the rest of the New House Fourth declined to look. Figgins' amazing news had sent them rushing to their own studies to find out whether the phenomenon had affected them.

They very quickly discovered that it had. Digges and Pratt were out of Study No. 3 again almost as soon as they had opened the door. Their faces were almost green.

"Look here—" hooted Digges.

"Some howling idiot has cleaned us right up!" roared Pratt. "My stamp collection has gone, too! Where are the police?"

"Oh crickey! So we're not the only ones, then! What about you, Reddy?" asked Figgins.

"Not a thing left barring the table and easy-chair we saw down on the landing!" howled Redfern. "It's a blessed robbery!"

"On a wholesale scale, too!" added Owen savagely. "We shall have to call the police in, chaps—it's obviously not a jape!"

"Jape! I should jolly well think not!" came Robinson's voice from Study No. 2. "All our stuff's been pinched—the entire giddy home! Send for Ratty or the Head!"

"My stamp collection!" groaned Pratt. "One stamp alone's catalogued at ten quid!"

"My desk!" hooted Digges. "If I find the rotter that pinched my desk—"

"Well, what about my bookcase?"

"My clock—who's seen my clock?"

"They've even boned our lino—"

Pandemonium soon reigned in the Fourth passage in the New House. Fellows rushed from study to study searching for their missing goods and chattels. Plundered property-owners bewailed their losses and cried aloud for the blood of the unknown marauder. In the excitement, there were collisions and consequent rows. The dispossessed ransacked the possessions of those who were unaffected, and one or two somewhat warm debates began on the subject of how far they were justified in their ransacking operations.

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Tempers were sorely tried in the five minutes that followed Figgins & Co.'s first discovery. In some cases words even led to blows, and the din of war began to sound through the usually peaceful precincts of the New House.

That soon brought Mr. Ratcliff on the scene.

The Housemaster of the New House had been in a raging mood ever since his encounter with Bayes & Co.'s van down the drive. Inwardly, it must be admitted, he had been longing for a chance of "taking it out" of somebody or other, and as soon as the noise of the commotion penetrated his study, Mr. Ratcliff seized a cane and fairly leaped out of the room.



Skimpole directed the operations of the moving m

He rushed up to the scene of disorder, and smiled grimly at the sight that met his eyes. By all appearances the acid-tempered Housemaster judged that he was going to have the opportunity of taking it out of quite a number of juniors.

"Boys!" he roared.

"Worth ten quid, if a penny, I tell you!"

"Take that!"

"Ow! Now you take that!"

"If I don't get my desk back—"

"Boys!" shrieked Mr. Ratcliff again.

"Oh! It's Ratty!"

"Cave, you men!"

The scrappers ceased to scrap and the propertyless ceased their lamentations. Mr. Ratcliff stalked down the passage, scowling at them.

"Disgraceful! Disgusting! Your behaviour is no better than that of hooligans and barbarians!" he remarked.

Mr. Ratcliff had always been renowned for his remarkable gift of invective.

"Please, sir—" ventured Figgins.

"Silence, Figgins! You, as the acknowledged ringleader of the ruffianly element in this House, have a greater share of the responsibility than the others. I shall see to it that—"

Mr. Ratcliff broke off suddenly, his eyes fixed on the doorway of Figgins' study.

"You see, sir—" said Figgins.

"Why, your study is completely empty, boy!" roared Mr. Ratcliff. "What is the meaning of this?"

"That's just what I want to know," said Figgins. "If you will allow me to speak—"

"No impertinence, Figgins, or you shall suffer for it! Do you seriously tell me that your study furniture has been taken away without your knowledge or consent?"

Figgins nodded.

"That's exactly what has happened, sir. Nor am I the only sufferer; there's Redfern—"

"And Digges and I," Pratt hastened to add. "Everything's gone, sir, including my stamp collection—"

"And all our stuff," said Robinson and Clarke in chorus

"There's my desk—my valuable desk—"

"My bookcase, sir—"

"Two easy-chairs—"



and even rolled up his sleeves and helped them!

"Silence!" hooted Mr. Ratcliff. He glared at the interrupters. "Then there has been a robbery! Some dastardly person or persons—"

"Oh, my hat! Skimpole!" muttered Kerr, as a sudden recollection came to him of the meeting with Skimpole in the quad. "It's Skimmy, of course! Must be!"

"Great pip!"

"What did you say, Kerr?" demanded Mr. Ratcliff.

"Hem! Nothing, sir!"

"You are endeavouring to deceive me, Kerr! You are attempting to shield the guilty party! Give me his name—immediately!"

Kerr met the Housemaster's gaze fearlessly.

"I'm afraid I can't do so, sir, since I don't know it!"

Mr. Ratcliff bit his lip.

"Very well, Kerr—very well, indeed! If I find that you have deceived me you shall pay dearly for it! In the meantime, I think I have a line of inquiry which may prove fruitful. I happened this afternoon to pass a van in the quad, apparently belonging to Bayes, the removal contractors, of Wayland. I shall make immediate inquiry now into the reason for that van's presence on the School premises. All those whose property has disappeared will remain here until I return."

And Mr. Ratcliff, after another glare, stamped off to the nearest telephone receiver.

He was back again in less than five minutes, his little eyes gleaming with excitement behind his spectacles.

"My inquiry has proved fruitful, boys—very fruitful indeed," he remarked. "The removal contractors admit having removed a large quantity of furniture from this

building to-day. Their instructions were received from a School House boy whose name I believe I heard you mention when I spoke to you, Kerr. I refer to Skimpole!"

"Oh!"

"As I suspected, you were shielding this dastardly creature, Kerr. For that you will report to me after prayers to-morrow morning for punishment."

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"And now," said Mr. Ratcliff, finding some difficulty in avoiding rubbing his hands with pleasure at the prospect of scoring off Mr. Railton of the School House, "I will proceed to the School House to lay my complaint before Mr. Railton. You wish to say something, Figgins?"

Figgins coloured uncomfortably.

"I only wanted to say, sir, that if it's Skimpole, I don't think he meant any harm. In a way I may have been to blame myself—"

"Nonsense!"

"Well, sir—"

"Utterly ridiculous!" snapped Mr. Ratcliff. "I understand that you have been playing football all the afternoon. How, then, is it possible for you to have been concerned in the matter?"

"I—I wasn't directly concerned—"

"You were not concerned at all, Figgins! This ruffianly School House boy Skimpole, according to my information, is alone responsible. You may rely on my seeing that he is brought to book. Possibly the boy's Housemaster—Mr. Ratcliff's thin lip curled—"may feel inclined to take his part; but, even so, nothing can save the boy from a flogging and expulsion!"

"But—"

"Please do not interrupt me, Figgins. I will proceed to the School House at the earliest possible moment, and I shall take good care that justice is done!"

"And what about our furniture?" asked Robinson.

"That will be restored from the store to-morrow. For to-night those whose furniture has been taken will either share studies with other boys, or do their prep in the dining-hall."

With that final instruction, the Housemaster of the New House bounced off. Downstairs, in his study, he sat down and permitted his thin lips to crease up into a smile. He did not go over to the School House at once. He found a kind of pleasure in exulting in his approaching "score" over his old rival, and postponed his visit to get the last ounce of enjoyment out of it.

Finally, however, he did at last rise and quit the study, School House bound.

CHAPTER 10.

The Spartan Disappears!

"HERE he is!"

"Good old Skimmy!"

"Hurrah!"

A roar of cheering, mixed with an equally loud roar of laughter, went up as Herbert Skimpole walked into the Junior Common-room after tea that evening.

The Common-room was crowded with excited juniors. They were discussing one topic and one topic only.

That topic was Skimpole's amazing moving job.

If Skimpole had been aiming at getting publicity for his Spartan campaign, he could not have achieved his aim in a better way. The entire school, from the lordliest of seniors to the inkiest of fags, was yelling over the disappearance of a vanload of New House furniture.

Less than half an hour had passed since that sensational discovery. But everybody knew everything there was to be known about it.

"Let's hear all about it, Skimmy!" urged Jack Blake, as the genius of the Shell stood with his back to the Common-room fire and blinked solemnly at the hilarious crowd.

"Really, my good fellows, there is little to tell. I cannot claim to have done much."

"Well, you've scored the biggest hit against Figgins and his crowd on record this term!" grinned Clifton Dane.

"That's something, I should say!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Well done, Skimmy!"

"I'm afraid I fail to comprehend your meaning, my dear fellows," said Skimpole, with a shake of his massive head. "As you may know, I do not purport to concern myself with House rivalries, which I regard as too flippant to be worthy of my attention. What I have done has been done for the most serious of motives."

"Oh, of course!"

"Exactly, old bean!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins certainly implied this morning that he was in favour of the abolition of study furniture. He mentioned it

in regard to Gore and Talbot, and not to himself, it is true; but, naturally, it follows that he should be willing to apply the theory in a practical manner to his own case!"

"Naturally!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Naturally or not, I can just picture Figgy's face when he looked in the empty study!" grinned Tom Merry.

"And Wynn's!" chortled Monty Lowther. "Imagine Fatty rolling in from footer to tea, only to find the cupboard bare—and the rest of the study, too!"

"Really, my good fellows, I fail to observe the connection between what you are discussing and——"

"Never mind, Skimmy!" said Blake consolingly. "You're not expected to understand. Whether you understand or not, there's no doubt about your being the hero of the hour now!"

"Hear, hear!"

Skimpole blinked at the grinning juniors in surprise.

"Well, really, this is extremely gratifying, but——"

"How many studies did you raid?" inquired Kangaroo.

"Did you get as far as Redfern's?"

"Indubitably, my dear Noble. We cleared Redfern's study, with the exception of an easy-chair and something else."

"And you haven't left a stick in Figgins' room?"

"Nothing whatever, I assure you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It was a great pleasure to help these deserving fellows on the way to a Spartan existence," said Skimpole, fairly beaming as his thoughts dwelt on his unique achievement. "I have no doubt that in the course of time they will feel very grateful to me for pointing out the way to a finer and sterner life!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Perhaps they will—in the course of time!" gurgled Levison.

"I don't think they do at present, though!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Skimpole started.

"Dear me! Have you heard news, then, Levison? Can it be possible that our worthy New House colleagues have taken objection to my action?"

"I'm afraid they have, old chap!"

The genius of the Shell looked rather concerned.

"Dear me! I did not intend to arouse any serious antagonism. As I explained previously, my impression was that Figgins was already a convert to the movement!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Tell me, my good youths, what steps are being taken in the matter? Are the fellows adopting a truculent attitude?" asked Skimpole anxiously.

"They are—they are! But that's not the worst. Ratcliff's taking a hand now. He's coming over shortly——"

"D-d-dear me! That is decidedly a matter for regret! I take it, then, that he is aware of my being implicated in the affair?"

Tom Merry nodded.

"He's found it out somehow or another. But cheer up, Skimmy. We're in with you on this, aren't we, chaps?"

"What-ho!" came an answering shout from a dozen of the juniors.

Skimpole shook his head.

"That is very kind of you. But I accept full responsibility; I shall insist on that. And it seems to me that acceptance of responsibility will be a somewhat serious matter."

"Jolly well think so! But we're in it, Skimmy! Don't be an ass!"

"I am sorry, my good youths; but I cannot accept your offer," said Skimpole firmly. "I have suddenly realised what is my obvious duty. As a neo-Spartanist, apparently as yet without a following at St. Jim's, I cannot submit to having my movement destroyed by the interference of the authorities. That, I fear, is what will happen if Mr. Ratcliff has his way!"

"Well, that's a pretty safe bet!" grinned Herries. "But what else are you going to do but submit?"

Skimpole drew himself up to his full height and blinked solemnly at the crowd.

"What I shall do," he answered, with dignity, "will be to go into hiding!"

"Wha-a-at!"

"I shall hide within the precincts of the school, but I shall hide, none the less. My movement will be driven underground, or, at any rate, somewhere where it will not be seen; but it will continue to exist until it is strong enough for me to come out into the open again!"

"But, my dear old ass——"

"You can't!"

"Impossible, old chap!"

"Where can you hide?"

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"What could you do about grub?"

Skimpole smiled faintly.

"St. Jim's is a big school, and it should be comparatively easy to find a hiding-place. As to food, that is a minor consideration."

"Oh, my hat!"—from Trimble!

"As a neo-Spartanist, I am prepared to make do on the minimum amount of nourishment necessary to sustain me," said Skimpole. "For the rest, I welcome hardship. The more hardship I experience the better my Spartan qualities will develop. Professor Balmcrumpet says——"

"Cave!" came a warning cry from the doorway just then.

"It's Kildare!"

"We're with you, Skimmy!"

Kildare strode into the Common-room and directed a brief nod at Skimpole.

"Wanted in Mr. Railton's study at once, Skimpole—— Here, what the thump——"

Kildare remained rooted to the floor with astonishment for a few seconds.

It was unusual to see Skimpole put a jerk into his movements. But he did so now. He made a dive under Kildare's outstretched arm and fairly raced for the door.

Kildare stared after him almost dazedly.

"Come back, Skimmy!" yelled Tom Merry.

But Skimmy evidently didn't intend to come back. He raced down the passage, and disappeared round the corner.

Kildare passed his hand over his forehead as though wondering whether it was all a dream. Eventually coming to the conclusion that it was reality, he wheeled round to the door and took up the chase, the entire Common-room bringing up behind him.

Then began a search—a search that took the searchers to every nook and corner in the House.

But not a trace of the missing genius was to be found.

Skimpole had disappeared!

CHAPTER 11.

Without Trace!

"SCANDALOUS!"

Mr. Ratcliff fairly spat out the word.

"But——" said Mr. Railton.

"Disgraceful! Abominable! Iniquitous!" howled Mr. Ratcliff. "Monstrous and outrageous! There, Mr. Railton, you have my opinion on it!"

Mr. Railton smiled a little ironically.

"You have made yourself perfectly clear, my dear sir," he said quietly. "As you see, I have sent for Skimpole. Naturally, I can do nothing until I hear his side of it."

Mr. Ratcliff laughed harshly.

"Nothing that Skimpole says, Mr. Railton, can lessen the enormity of his offence. It seems scarcely worth while interrogating him. I suggest that you take him straight to the Head."

"I do not intend to do that until I have heard what the boy may have to say," said Mr. Railton tartly. "I am convinced that there is an explanation."

"Ridiculous!"

"Really, Mr. Ratcliff——"

"Absurd!" roared the Housemaster of the New House. "No explanation is possible. The young idiot, in hiring the contractors to remove the property of my boys, was deliberately pursuing the vengeful feud existing between the two Houses—a feud which you seem personally to foster, my dear sir!"

Mr. Railton frowned.

"Are you not in danger of losing control of yourself, Mr. Ratcliff? To say that a vengeful feud exists between your House and mine is to caricature the true position. Healthy rivalry there certainly is, and I, for one, see no harm in it."

Mr. Ratcliff snorted.

"Utter nonsense!"

"You are characterising my remarks as nonsense?" asked Mr. Railton, in a dangerously steady voice.

Mr. Railton coughed. He didn't quite like the look in his old rival's eyes.

"I bear you personally no animosity, Mr. Railton——" he began.

Mr. Railton smiled grimly.

"Thank you for that assurance, my dear sir. I began to have a doubt on the point. To revert—the relations between the boys of the two Houses are most friendly and satisfactory, and the rivalry they display only emphasises the excellence of the situation."

"I cannot agree."

Mr. Railton shrugged.

"As to the boy Skimpole, he is, from my experience, the most harmless and inoffensive boy imaginable. I am sure he is incapable of playing a practical joke."

"If this, then, is not a practical joke, what is it?" demanded Mr. Ratcliff heatedly.

"It is precisely that, my dear sir, that I hope to get from Skimpole. Come in!" finished Mr. Railton, as a knock sounded on the door.

Kildare opened the door in response to the Housemaster's summons. He stepped into the room, and the two masters saw that he was alone.

"We ordered you to bring Skimpole, Kildare!" snapped Mr. Ratcliff.

Kildare ignored him and addressed Mr. Railton.

"I am sorry, sir," he said quietly. "Skimpole seems to have disappeared completely. I have searched the House from top to bottom without finding a trace of him."

There was a sneer on Mr. Ratcliff's face.

"Incredible, Kildare!" said Railton. "He must be somewhere close at hand."

"Undoubtedly the young ruffian is not far off!" snapped Mr. Ratcliff. "I suggest that you and I join in the search, Mr. Railton. Without a doubt we shall soon run him to earth."

"If you wish it, Mr. Ratcliff—"

Herbert Skimpole of the Shell sat on the roof, deeply engrossed in a large volume by Professor Balmycrumpet.

The genius of the Shell was not happy. It was a bitterly cold night and his teeth were chattering, while his bony knees fairly knocked together in his sack, his sole article of raiment.

Skimpole had taken to the roofs for the purpose of holding out against the anti-Spartans of St. Jim's. But now that the first excitement had worn off, the Spartan of the Shell was finding that his heroic stand was proving, in more senses than one, a distinct frost.

Neo-Spartanism, like a good many other of Skimpole's innumerable 'isms, was very nice so long as it remained within the massive volumes of the learned Professor Balmycrumpet. When it descended from theory to practice there were found to be a good many drawbacks.

Skimpole felt that he must be discovering all the drawbacks at one go. Certainly, he had never felt more uncomfortable and wretched in his life.

Creak!

NEXT WEEK'S PROGRAMME!

'ST. JIM'S ON THE 'BUST'!

By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**

A Ripping, Long, Complete Story of St. Jim's

Another

"YOUNG THUNDERBOLT!"

Yarn

By **ARTHUR S. HARDY.**

Further Thrilling Chapters of

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Our Magnificent Sporting Serial.

ALSO

Potts, the Office-Boy, in Another of his Pranks
and

The Inimitable "Whiskers" in Another Bout
of Back-chat With the Editor!



"Most certainly I wish it!"
"Then I will accompany you, though I seriously doubt whether we can do any more than Kildare has done already."

"That remains to be seen!" snapped the irascible Housemaster of the New House, stamping out of the study.

During the twenty minutes or so that followed, Mr. Railton and Kildare gave Mr. Ratcliff his head, so to speak. They followed Mr. Ratcliff upstairs and downstairs, and all over the School House.

And everywhere they drew a blank. The genius of the Shell seemed to have gone as though the earth had opened and swallowed him up.

CHAPTER 12.

The End of Spartanism!

BOOM!
The first stroke of midnight boomed out from the old clock tower of St. Jim's.

The bright wintry moonlight shone over the snow-covered roofs of the school buildings.

Skimpole started. The school clock had stopped chiming now, and in the ensuing silence he had suddenly heard an interruption in the form of a slight sound, like the squeaking of a man's boot.

He looked up from his book. Then he rose and moved into the shadow of a chimney.

Silhouetted against the moonlit sky was the dark shape of a man, moving slowly towards the flat part of the roof that led on to the windows of some of the box-rooms.

Skimpole was not, as a rule, quick at working things out. But on this occasion he arrived at a hasty conclusion.

That conclusion was that the man was a "cat" burglar.

In the circumstances, it was a perfectly natural conclusion. Who else but a cat burglar could be prowling about on the roof of the School House at midnight, it was difficult to imagine.

Skimpole peered out again, his heart palpitating with excitement. His eyes gleamed behind his big spectacles as he saw the man throw open the window of a box-room and make to step in.

For a moment the genius of the Shell hesitated. Then he acted. Despite his eccentric ways, Skimpole was not lacking in courage. All the crooks in England would not have put Skimpole off his stroke when he felt like taking offensive action. He felt like it now. Skimpole did not approve of burglars and was willing to express his disapproval in forcible terms.

There was a loose ridge-tile near the spot where he stood. Skimpole grasped that tile and advanced swiftly to the attack.

Not till he was upon his quarry did he betray his presence. Then he happened to slip, and in doing so, made a slight sound.

The dark figure climbing through the box-room window wheeled round. But he was too late to ward off the attack. Skimpole fairly flew at him and brought down the tile on his head with all the force he could muster.

Thud!

"Ow!"

There was a yell from the supposed burglar. Then he overbalanced and pitched through the open window, to land on the floor of the box-room with a loud crash.

Skimpole jumped in after him, his blood fairly up now. "Remain there, you unprincipled fellow!" he shouted sternly. "If you attempt to rise, I will direct another blow at you that will keep you quiet until the police arrive!"

There was a commotion outside the door at that moment. Immediately afterwards the door was flung open and the light switched on, to reveal a buzzing crowd of pyjama-clad seniors and juniors.

They stared blankly at Skimpole and his prisoner.

"Skimmy!" exclaimed Tom Merry dazedly. "What the thump—"

"All is well, my good youths!" said Skimpole, with a reassuring wave of his hand. "I have caught the burglar, as you see. Will somebody kindly call Mr. Railton?"

"But—but Mr. Railton is here!"

"Eh?"

"He's here already, on the floor at your feet!"

"Wha-a-at?" shrieked Skimpole.

"Down there!" hooted Tom, pointing to Skimpole's victim. "Of all the frabjous asses—"

"But, my good youth, this is a burglar——"

"Burglar, bosh!" snapped Kildare, pushing his way to the front of the crowd. "Let me help you up, sir!"

He reached out a helping hand to the "burglar," and the latter staggered to his feet. Then, even Skimpole could see he had made a mistake. There was no doubt whatever that his supposed burglar was Mr. Railton, his own Housemaster!

"D-d-dear me!" stuttered Skimpole.

Mr. Railton gasped.

"Ow!" he said. "Oh dear! My goodness! Ow! Oh!"

"My dear Mr. Railton, how will you ever be able to forgive my egregious error?" stammered Skimpole. "I am dismayed beyond description. I quite thought——"

"Ow! It's all right, Skimpole!" groaned Mr. Railton. "My own fault, I suppose, for prowling about the roofs. But I was firmly convinced, somehow, that you were up here, and I had to come to fetch you down."

"How dreadfully unfortunate!" exclaimed Skimpole. "I assure you, my good sir, that I am overwhelmed——"

"There is no need to be overwhelmed, Skimpole. You did the best thing possible, I suppose, according to your lights. If I had been a burglar, we should have said that you had acted with great promptitude and courage!"

"Something in that!" said Kildare, with a smile. "How do you feel now, sir?"

"There is no serious harm done, I think, Kildare," answered the Housemaster, rubbing his head ruefully. "I must confess, however, that I can feel it, and shall probably continue to feel it for some time. Oh!"

"If you think I should summon a doctor——"

"Nonsense! And now to bed, all of you!" ordered Mr. Railton, turning to the excited crowd. "The whole thing was a mistake, as you can see. Return to your dormitories at once!"

"Oh! Yes, sir!"

"You also, Skimpole. I shall require you now, on your honour, to promise not to attempt to go into hiding again!"

"Dear me! I am delighted to give you the promise, my dear Mr. Railton! I am too relieved by your rapid recovery to consider anything else just now," said Skimpole. "In any case, I must admit that I was beginning to feel the extremes of discomfort; though, according to the tenets of neo-Spartanism——"

"Exactly! Good-night, Skimpole!" said Mr. Railton.

And he took the genius of the Shell gently by the ear and led him out, without giving him the chance of going into details about neo-Spartanism. Mr. Railton had had

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quite enough of neo-Spartanism already to last him for the rest of his life.

Skimpole, of course, received a right royal welcome on his return to the Shell dormitory. There and in all the other dormitories of the School House the adventure of Skimpole and the "burglar" was the subject of ribald comment long after lights had been extinguished again.

"Your behaviour, Skimpole, has been inexcusable!"

Dr. Holmes, the venerable Head of St. Jim's, was speaking. It was the morning after the scene in the box-room, and Mr. Railton, with Mr. Ratcliff's eager co-operation, had related the misdemeanours of the genius of the Shell in full.

Now the Head was addressing Skimpole for the first time, and his face was grim and stern as he did so.

Skimpole blinked at the Head in a deeply troubled way.

"Really, my good sir, it distresses me to hear you speak of my behaviour in a condemnatory manner. I assure you, sir, I meant no harm."

"That, Skimpole, is the only redeeming feature about the whole matter. I am willing to admit that through all the extraordinary thing you have done, you intended no harm!"

A weird, gurgling noise left Mr. Ratcliff's throat.

"I protest, sir. I have ample proof that Skimpole's actions were deliberate and premeditated."

"Really, Mr. Ratcliff, that can hardly be," said the Head mildly. "I have already had Lowther and others from the School House, and Figgins and his friends from your own House before me, admitting that they were between them almost entirely responsible!"

"Oh!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff. And he didn't dispute the point further.

"Taking all things into consideration," said the Head, "I think justice will be done if all concerned, including Skimpole, are caned. Perhaps you will arrange, gentlemen, for the boys to present themselves to me this afternoon during classes. You, Skimpole, will present yourself at the same time."

"With pleasure, my dear Dr. Holmes, but——"

"Silence! Now, Skimpole, before you go, I must warn you. You appear to have become inculcated with some extravagant ideas held by a group of pseudo-scientists. I advise you to abandon those ideas."

"Really, sir——"

"When you attain years of discretion, Skimpole, you will doubtless be able to bring to bear on such subjects as Spartan practices a mind more capable of dealing with them than you possess at present. In the meantime, remember that you are under the authority of myself, the other masters, and the prefects. Remember, Skimpole——"

"Y-y-yes, sir! At-choooooo!" said Skimpole suddenly.

"I beg you to remember——"

"Exactly, sir! I will—— 'Shooo! Ashoooooo!"

"Bless my soul! The boy has contracted a severe cold!" exclaimed the Head. "He must be taken to the sanatorium at once. This, Skimpole, is what comes of spending hours on the roof——"

"'Shoooo! Precisely, sir! Ashoooooo!"

"In intensely cold weather——"

"Tishooooo! Ati-shoooooo!"

"Impossible! It is utterly impossible to reprimand a boy in this condition!" gasped Dr. Holmes. "Please arrange for the boy to be transferred to the sanatorium immediately, Mr. Railton."

"And Skimpole is thus to escape punishment altogether?" asked Mr. Ratcliff, almost savagely. "I beg to suggest, sir——"

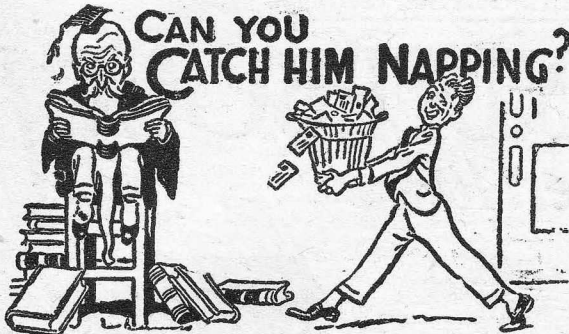
"Really, Mr. Ratcliff, I confess that I am weary of the whole subject. I fancy, anyhow, that the cold Skimpole has caught will give him a more effective lesson than he would learn from me!"

And that was all the change Mr. Ratcliff got out of the Head of St. Jim's!

Apparently the Head was right. When Skimpole came out of the sanatorium he seemed to be completely cured, not only of the cold, but of neo-Spartanism, too! The shock he had had in mistaking Mr. Railton for a burglar, combined with the cold he had contracted as a result of his exposure on the roof of the School House, had apparently destroyed his illusions. Skimpole's colleagues heard no more references to Professor Balmcrumpet's amazing cult.

For Skimpole's sake, they were glad. But it was a long time before they ceased to chuckle over the recollection of the time when Skimpole, the Spartan, had run riot at St. Jim's.

(Skimpole's had another outburst, but he will keep quiet for a bit now! But don't miss "St. Jim's on the Bust!" next week's astounding yarn of Tom Merry & Co.)



Hallo, Everybody, Happy Christmas! But about old Whiskers. What with crackers, riddles, and one thing and another round the Christmas tables, surely you can find a question he CAN'T answer? Have a shot, anyway!

I FOUND the Editor in his sanctum this morning, chums, and in a very good humour; he was sitting at his desk chortling to himself, and gazing with a gleeful expression at a strange object on his knee. When I came closer I realised that the strange object was a turkey. "Ha, my lad!" beamed the Ed. "Just look at what I've drawn in the Christmas raffle! A real turkey! But what's worrying me, Whiskers, is how to set about getting the stuffing into it. Don't you think it would be much better if they grew turkeys all ready stuffed?"

"The turkey, sir," I began, "has first of all to be plucked; then its inside must be put outside; after which you stuff it with forcemeat, chestnuts, sausages, mottoes out of the Christmas crackers, and any other seasonable odds-and-ends you may find lying around; after that the turkey is cooked, served, divided into sections by the means of a sharp chisel and a surgical saw, and stuffed into the insides of the cousins, aunts, nephews, nieces, etcetera, etcetera."

The old Ed. looked thoughtfully at the turkey on his knee. "I've got a notion," said he, "that this turkey is one of the old brigade. By the look of his leg muscles, I should say he swam from Turkey to England, and then went on a walking tour looking for Father Christmas."

"You're quite mistaken, sir," I ventured to remark, "in thinking that turkeys come from Turkey. The name 'turkey' is given them on account of the noise they make—when alive—of 'turk, turk, turk!' These birds come from America—at least, they did to begin with. Yes, sir, both the turkeys and the 'talkies' come from the States."

"Talkies and turkeys! Ha, ha, ha! That's rather good!" chuckled the Ed. "Know any more?"

"Lots," I replied, blushing with pride. "There are two distinct breeds of turkeys in this country—the Norfolk, which is black in the plumage; and the Cambridge, which is a bigger and stronger bird, and has a glossier lot of feathers. The Norfolk is the same breed of turkey as is found in North America, and the Cambridge type is found in Mexico. The turkey was introduced into this country about four hundred years ago."

"You don't recollect this fellow landing here, I suppose?" asked the Editor. "Anyway, that's quite enough of that. Just get along answering these queries. First of all, Will Stevens, who lives Plaistow way, wants to know what breeze is."

"The ashes or cinders that remain after coal or charcoal burning is called breeze. Then there's the wind that

blows my whiskers over my left shoulder in the Tube every morning—that's a breeze, too. And I always get the breeze up when I arrive late at the office, sir. That's another sort of breeze—very uncomfortable it is, too, sir, believe me!"

"Know anything about buffaloes?" asked the Ed., looking up from another letter.

"Just try me!" I replied. "I used to train them as pets, believe me. A great

many people associate the buffalo with the Wild West, the prairie, and all that sort of thing. As a matter of fact, the buffaloes out in America are really bison. The biggest buffaloes in the world are to be found in India. They spend their time in the grass jungles near the swamps, and as the grass is over twenty feet in height they are very difficult fellows to spot. They have a great fancy for standing about in the mud; and when the mud hardens on their skins it serves a useful purpose, as it keeps off the little gadflies that settle there. These buffaloes are so strong that they can overthrow an elephant, and tigers are positively scared of them. An Indian driver with a herd of tame buffaloes doesn't turn a hair if he sees a few tigers in the way, for the tigers usually turn and run. If they don't, the jolly old buffaloes make short work of them. In the old days in India fights between buffaloes and tigers were arranged as a spectacle; but I should imagine the tigers decided it wasn't fair, and refused to play."

"There are buffaloes in Africa, are there not, my learned and whiskery friend?"

"Yes, sir, no end of them. They roam over the plains in herds of fifty to a hundred at a time. In Cape Colony many of the herds are protected by the Government. In West Africa there is a much smaller buffalo, known as the red dwarf buffalo. My great-grandfather used to tame buffaloes, you know, sir, but he met with a nasty accident one day."

"And what was that?" asked the Ed.

MECCANO'S

1931 IMPROVEMENTS.

Every year sees improvements in Meccano, and 1931 brings new parts, new models, and new scope for keen constructors and inventors.

With the No. 3 Meccano Outfit, priced at 27s. 6d., no less than 686 working models can now be built—and this number refers only to the models the makers themselves have designed, and is exclusive of those every inventive Meccano owner plans and constructs for himself.

To-day, with all the new parts that each year has added to its range, Meccano engineering is a game that in interest, in fun, and in educative power has been improved beyond all knowledge. Fathers who give their sons Meccano this year will be inclined to aver that the modern boy has all the luck!

"Why, sir, believe me, he was approaching a very fierce buffalo one afternoon with his buffalo-net, when the horrid, cruel buffalo caught the old buffer low under the belt. He was laid up for weeks; but, as he said at the time, it gave him a chance to read the GEM right through every Wednesday, and that was something."

"I should say it was, indeed!" responded the Editor, picking up another epistle. "George Best says he has been reading a book about India, and some children in the story speak of their ayah. What is an ayah, Whiskers?"

"Originally, and in the first instance, ayah was a Spanish word, spelt A-Y-A, meaning a children's nurse. The Portuguese introduced the word into India, and it was picked up by the English and used for their native nurses."

"The next brain-twister is from Tom Clive, of Carlyle. He wants us to tell him what a Horned Toad looks like."

"A very queer chap, believe me, sir," said I. "The Horned Toad is really a lizard, found in the desert sand. It's a difficult chap to find, though, being grey-brown in colour, like the sand itself, and it can move quickly like a mouse. It has sharp spines round its neck, and this enables it to burrow into the sand and get out of sight."

"I see. Now, can you tell a Deptford 'Gemite' what a Berserker is?"

"For an explanation of that word, sir," said I, "we must go to the old legends of Scandinavia—you know, sir, Norway and all round there. According to the old stories, there was a gentleman in the old days named Berserk, and he had twelve sons. Both he and his sons were noted for their reckless courage in battle, and always went into the fight without any armour, wearing only a bearskin shirt, or 'sark.' The word 'berserker' afterwards became used for anyone who was very reckless and daring. You see, Ed., you can't catch the whiskery one napping, can you?"

"Just wait!" growled the Editor. With that he flung the turkey on to the floor. "That bird's a bit too heavy for me, and I don't fancy the job of carrying it home. How much d'you think it weighs, Whiskers?"

"I've no idea, sir," said I, picking up the turkey. "It's a fine bird, sir, and no mistake." "Yes," said the Ed. "I was jolly lucky winning that! That's a fine, plump bird, judging by the weight of it!" At that moment Adolphus, our office-boy, burst into the room and looked at the turkey admiringly. "That's a fine turkey, sir," said Adolphus. "Look at its fevers; they're as fick as anything!" "Yes, my lad," said the Ed.; "and feel the weight of it!"

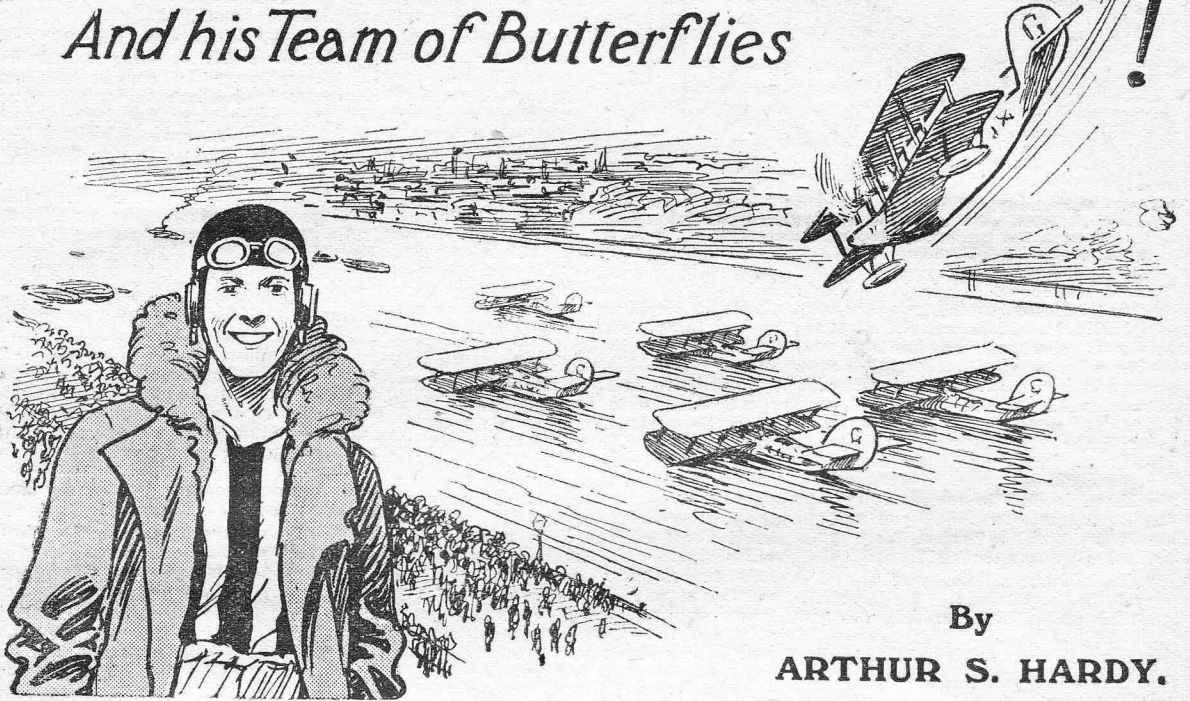
It was then that I discovered the dreadful truth about that turkey! Underneath the plumage of the bird someone had cunningly fixed a couple of heavy weights, which accounted for the Editor's turkey being so heavy. When the old Ed. found how he had been done he flew into a great rage. "Did anybody else draw anything in this rotten raffle?" he demanded. "I don't know, sir," said Adolphus; "but one of the artists is in the next room, drawing you when you discover these weights!"

The old Ed. looked in such a wax I decided not to wait, so I threw the turkey and the weights into the waste-paper basket and walked out.

ANOTHER OF OUR SPLENDID FOOTER AND FLYING YARNS!

YOUNG THUNDERBOLT!

And his Team of Butterflies



By

ARTHUR S. HARDY.

CHAPTER 1. Business!

"CLIFF, my boy," said Mr. Harland Jackson, glancing approvingly at his son Clifford, "what would you like to do—go back to school for another term or two, or step straight into business and face the world?"

"I'd sooner go right into business, dad," answered Clifford Jackson. "And, besides, now that you've taken over the chairmanship of the City Football Club and the Butterflies are a better team than the professional players, you'll need me, won't you?"

"I shall need you so badly Clif that I had made up my mind what I would like you to do long ago. You'd better come right into the Butterfly Works and get the hang of things there and run my football team until the City pros get back to their lost form."

"All right, pater," he agreed.

And so the moment breakfast was finished Mr. Harland Jackson wrote a letter to the Head of St. Clement's School, saying that Clifford would not be returning there next term, and, enclosing the forfeited fees, posted it before going to the Butterfly Works.

That very morning Clifford motored to the works in his father's car, and started to learn the business.

"That boy of mine is going a long way, Mac," said Mr. Harland Jackson to Sandy McFarlane, his show-room manager. "Just look what he's done for me and my Butterflies already! At the very time when we were beginning to feel a draught through the fierce competition of the Clipper airplanes, that boy of mine comes along and gives the Butterfly planes the biggest advertisement they have had for years."

"Och, ay!" returned the red-haired and freckled Scotsman. "Master Clifford is no ordinary lad, d'ye ken. But I hae me doots as to whether ye are wise to allow him to take over the responsibility of running a team af amateur laddies fra the works in the City colours."

Mr. Harland Jackson laughed.

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"He wants to do it, Mac. I had the whole team properly registered the other day. The Butterflies are going to wear the City colours at Belton next Saturday."

"They're only a team o' kiddies, Mr. Jackson. They'll be playing a team o' men. I doot whether they can win. There's trouble brewing at City Road ground, I understand. How'll the laddie fare wi' that?"

"Oh, he'll find his feet all right, Sandy. He's got to go through the mill. I want Clif to do big things."

"I admire your ambition, sir," replied Sandy McFarlane; "and I only hope the laddie has na bit off more than he can chew. Look at that fellow Crook Garside watching the laddie noo. Crook is a cousin o' Snarler, the trainer at the City ground, I believe. A clever workman, but a dour, disagreeable mon. I dinna like him."

"He does his job well, Sandy. I don't like him myself. He came to me from Clippers, I always remember, and he has hinted more than once that he considers the Clipper a better plane than the Butterfly!"

"The impertinent rascal!" ejaculated Sandy, starting in a bee-line to meet the man in question. "Noo then, Crook, hae ye nae work to du that ye must spy upon the laddie? I dinna want ye in the show-room!"

Crook Garside, so named because his nose had been knocked crooked in a street fight years ago, shot a vicious look at Sandy, and walked away mumbling to himself.

Sandy stayed to smile at Clif.

"I have never seen a young man play a bonnier game than yu did playing for the Butterflies against the City, at City Road, last Wednesday!" he said. "You've been made captain of the new team, I understand. Are you going to play at Belton, Mr. Jackson?"

The boy laughed.

"Of course I am," he replied. "And, look here, Sandy, if you call me 'mister' any more we shall quarrel! Call me Clif, for Pete's sake. And, I say, pater says I may do as I like. And so, as I have a double job in trying to learn the ropes here and in running the City club, at City Road ground, I'll take the afternoon off, if you don't mind, and look in there."

ELEVEN BUTTERFLIES
SCORE FOUR GOALS
BETWEEN 'EM!

"Looking for trouble—eh?" commented Sandy Mac.
 "Of course I am! And I'm going to find it as long as Snarler remains trainer of the City!"

CHAPTER 2. Trouble!

SOON after lunch Clif went out into the grounds belonging to his father's house. Opening a large shed he raised the tail of the Butterfly Minor airplane which, with folded wings, was housed inside, on to the tail trolley, and hauled her out into the open. There he swung the wings into place and started the engine. The little air-bus, all shining enamel and glittering silver, looked like a graceful giant butterfly, with its wings outstretched to catch the sunshine, as it throbbed and trembled on the lawn.

Inside a minute Clif was taxi-ing in her over the grass, to rise at speed just as his father came out.

"Hi! Wait a moment, Clif!" shouted Mr. Jackson.

"Sorry, dad!" yelled the boy, as he circled round and waved his hand. "Can't stop now! I'm off to City Road!"

"Mac," said Mr. Jackson to the show-room manager when he got to the works, "Clif's flown to City Road ground alone. Some of the players are sore because I've given the team a rest and intend to play my team of Butterflies in the City colours. And Snarler, as you know, has made a dead set against the lad. I'm not free to go, because I have to preside at a conference at two-fifteen. Do you think I ought to send anybody to look after my boy?"

"Better let the laddie fight it out himself, sir," advised Mac.

But a minute or two later, when Mac met Hank Parsons, the best pilot employed on the testing-ground, and told him all about it, Hank was not so sanguine.

"I know a lot about Snarler, Mr. McFarlane," said Hank, looking worried. "He's mad because Mr. Jackson has bought the club. Snarler used to do what he liked under the old management, but he'll have his claws cut now. Young Thunderbolt got his father to take over the City club. Snarler won't forgive him for that. Last Wednesday somebody gave Clif a smack over the head and tried to burn his air-bus just before the test match between the City and the Butterflies team. I don't think Clif ought to have been allowed to go alone."

"But the laddie was up in the air and flying before his feyther ever kened," said Sandy McFarlane. "Who could hee stopped him?" He glanced at the clock. "Now you're wastin' your time, Hank Parsons. You ought tae be out on the flying ground testing those new machines."

Hank turned on his heels without another word, and stalked out on to the testing-ground, where he saw more than twenty lovely airplanes ranged in line, waiting to be tested. There were all kinds of Butterflies there—Butterfly Minor, Butterfly Major, the Hawk Butterfly, the Eagle Butterfly, and, biggest of all, the Albatross Butterfly, a monster machine, capable of carrying twenty passengers, with luggage.

Hank stepped into a Minor, and was soon soaring up in the blue and making his test, banking and stalling, looping the loop, flying upside down, and dropping in spirals—a master of the thrilling art. And in the streets around the great airplane works thousands gathered to watch Hank do his stuff.

Up there, Hank looked down on the town, and stared wistfully at the brown patch surrounded with black terraces and a slate-roofed stand, which was the City Football ground. Clif was there, for Hank knew that the bright little speck which brightened the sombre patch was Clif's plane.

Clif had arrived at the football ground twenty minutes ago, swooping down from the sun-warmed sky to the bare football pitch like a master, and landing there like a bird.

He saw one or two of the players lounging against the rails. None of them gave him a greeting, and most of them scowled as he hurried by. They hated the boy because Snarler told them Clif was responsible for his father buying the chairman and directors out. What did it matter if, by doing so, the boy had saved the oldest football club in the League, since the whole jolly lot of them had been given a rest? Mr. Harland Jackson intended to sack the lot of them, Snarler said. And a fat chance any of them would get of a decent transfer-fee and decent wages with another club, now that the City were down at the bottom of the League table, with a record of 13 games played; games won, 0; games drawn, 0; games lost, 13; with 11 goals scored for, and over 70 against; and points 0.

"Fancy being run by a kid!" snarled one of the players savagely. "And him landing on the pitch like that! For two pins I'd go out there and set fire to his bus!"

Clif was conscious of the players' hostility, but he waved his hand and wished them good-afternoon as he hastened towards the club rooms.

The hall of the clubhouse was empty. The office door was shut. Clif went up the stairs, attracted by the murmur of voices. He turned a handle, half pushed the door open, and then stopped, for he heard Snarler mention his name. Listeners seldom hear any good of themselves. Clif didn't.

"You can talk from now till Doomsday," Snarler was saying, "but you won't get me to alter my opinion, Grover! What's Harland Jackson bought the club for? Why has he given you chaps a rest, and signed on a whole team of amateurs from the Butterfly Works? Has he done it out of charity? I'll say he hasn't. He's done it to advertise himself and his rotten Butterfly airplanes! They say his son Clifford worked the whole business. I say the boy didn't, in spite of the fact that he came to see our directors at the winding-up meeting. Even if he did, it only makes things worse. If all of you like to knuckle under to a swanky little schoolboy, I don't! I hate the sight of the brat!"

Grover spoke.

"It's not a question of knuckling under, Snarler; it's a question of a living at stake. Personally, I like Young Thunderbolt. I know something about football, and I tell you this—that boy is the smartest and best centre-forward I've been up against this season. His team of Butterflies licked our best league team. Can you blame Mr. Jackson if he gives them a run? And don't forget he paid us a month's wages straight off last week—and we hadn't had a bean from the old board for longer than that."

"And why?" Snarler's voice rang vindictively. "I'll tell you—it's just a sop—something to keep you quiet. Mr. Harland Jackson intends to fool the League Management Committee and the Football Association by putting in a bogus board of directors. He'll get rid of the lot of you and run the club on the cheap, putting thousands of pounds in his pocket. He's got you all cold. But thank goodness I hold a firm contract and it'll cost him a deal of money before he can get rid of me."

Amid the rising clamour of many voices Snarler did not hear Clif come into the room.

"He's right, Grover. Why should we be treated like dirt? Why should Mr. Harland Jackson have it all his own way?" shouted one of the players.

"Hands up, then," howled Snarler, "all those who mean to strike!"

Clif saw almost every player's right hand held above his head. Some of the players in their eagerness held up two. Only Grover, the captain of the City League team, kept his hands down.

"Carried unanimously!" yelled Snarler. "Thank you, boys! Now we'll show Mr. Jackson and his pup of a son what we can do!"

Clif pushed his way through the press and confronted the trainer.

"And what can you do, Snarler?" he asked, with an amused smile.

"Young Thunderbolt! It's the kid!" chorused the startled players, most of them looking rather foolish as they stepped back.

Snarler's eyes narrowed evilly, his thin lips tightened.

"If you've been listening, why then you know!" he sneered.

"You didn't think a crowd of men were gonna let themselves be bossed by a half-baked kid like you, did yer?"

Clif's hands were in his pockets. His smile broadened. Shifting his feet uneasily, Grover thought that the boy bossed the situation.

"The thing that surprises me," remarked Young Thunderbolt, as he looked round at the grim and worried faces, "is that they allow themselves to be bossed by a worm like you."

Snarler rocked back on his heels, livid, his fingers twitching, his evil eyes nearly closed.

"Now listen, boys," Clif went on, swinging round. "I know it's rough on you to be given a rest. But what can you expect when you look at the City's record? Not a game won—not a point gained. Gates dwindled to nothing. The club in debt, and likely to go under unless my dad can save it. You won't be out of play for long. What you've got to do is think things out and train quietly—but not under a trainer like Snarler—"

Snarler exploded like flint in a hot fire.

"Now I'll tell you how things stand," Clif went on. "My pater, who built the Butterfly Works, has taken over and saved the club. He wants me to help put it on its feet again. Well, I'm going to give the Butterflies' team a run—I'm going to advertise. Before the season's over the City may have become the most talked-of team in the country, and if you boys have any sporting spirit you ought to be glad of that."

Clif danced over Snarler's tripping foot, chinned him with a left and right, and dropped him on his back!



"What about advertising your father's rotten Butterfly air-

planes?" shouted Snarler, stepping close to Clif. Young Thunderbolt laughed.

"Well, now, my father has done some good for the town, Snarler!" he cried. "And the Butterfly's a fine plane. Surely you won't blame him if he gets a little bit of advertisement for them out of it! That was my idea; that was why I asked him to buy the Club."

"The boy's right, Snarler!" cried Grover.

Snarler made no reply, but drove a smashing blow at Clif's head. But Young Thunderbolt was not to be caught napping, even if he had kept his hands in his pockets. With a shift of his head he avoided the blow, took the one which followed it on the shoulder, danced over Snarler's tripping foot, and then chinned the trainer with left and right each side of the jaw, dropping him on his back as if he had been shot!

It was the neatest, smartest thing the City players had ever seen, and they stared wide-eyed at the little active schoolboy who had done it.

For a moment Snarler sprawled upon the boards: then up he got, and with a wild cry leapt in again. This time his punches landed. Then he held on to Clif and hit as he held. Grover tried to separate them, but some of the others who sided with Snarler tore him away.

"Give the kid fair play, you chaps!" shouted Grover. "He's only a young 'un!"

Clif tore himself loose and smacked Snarler in the left eye, then doubled him up with a body punch.

In through the door swarmed the players who had been talking outside in the ground, to seize and hold Clif whilst Snarler gathered himself together for another attack.

Outside, the roar of a dropping plane echoed above the din.

When Hank Parsons, wearing his Works overalls, burst into the room, he found Grover being tight held by two of the City men, whilst the others formed a ring round Clif and Snarler, who were fighting in the cramped space. Clif was only a boy, and Snarler a big and muscular man used to rough-house fighting. Hank growled savagely as he saw what was going on, and broke the ring with tearing hands.

Swinging Clif out of the way, he faced Snarler and sent the trainer crashing to the boards with a right-handed hay-maker.

Then he swung round. Clif, with his lips swollen, one eye nearly closed, and a lump on one cheek, grinned at him.

"What did you want to interfere for, Hank?" he protested. "I wanted to finish him myself. And I might have done it, too, even if he is much older and bigger and stronger than I am."

"Forget him, young 'un," answered Hank; then, glowering at the shamefaced players, he said, with curling lips: "A nice lotta guys you are, to stand by and sanction a thing like that!"

He spurned the slowly-recovering Snarler with his boot. "Now get up and get outside, you," he cried, "or else I'll pitch you out! What are you gonna do with him, Thunderbolt—give him the air?"

Clif looked into Snarler's wicked eyes as the trainer slunk by.

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"You've entered the City ground for the last time, Snarler," he cried. "We don't want a brute like you for our trainer."

"You can't get rid of me unless you pay me six months' wages—it's in the contract!" bellowed Snarler.

"Call at the office at the Butterfly works at half-past nine in the morning and I'll see that my pater hands you your cheque," said Clif.

CHAPTER 3.

Fired!

WHEN Snarler arrived at the office building attached to the famous Butterfly Works he found Hank Parsons waiting anxiously outside

a door on which was painted: "Mr. Harland Jackson, Private." And Snarler sneered.

"The Butterfly Company will be bankrupt inside a year," he jeered. "You mark my words. Clippers will wipe them off the map."

"Yeah! Don't you wish they could?" Hank shot back. "For two pins I'd give you another crack to match the one you got yesterday."

Snarler instinctively ducked and, ignoring the notice that asked visitors to inquire in Room 37, he pushed the door open and stalked in, keeping his hat on his head and his hands in his pockets.

Mr. Harland Jackson was writing at his desk. Clif was standing beside him. Snarler stalked right up to them, his underjaw thrust out insolently.

"Excuse me, Mr. Jackson," he cried, "I've called for my money! I've got an agreement, mind, and I mean having all I'm entitled to."

Clif's father went on filling in a cheque. Clif knocked Snarler's hat off his head and kicked it into a corner.

"You're not too old to learn manners, Snarler," he said cheerfully.

Mr. Jackson blotted the cheque and gave it to Snarler. "It's a cheque for six months' wages," he said. "You can go straight to my bank and cash it now. That sees you through. And remember, if I find you inside the City ground, trying to make trouble between me and my players, I'll have you thrown out and prosecuted."

Snarler leant on the desk. "Wait a minute, Mr. Jackson!" he bawled. "This thing hasn't begun yet. I always get my own back. You'll be sorry for this—soon!"

"If you threaten me, I'll hand you over to the police," said Mr. Harland Jackson coolly. "Get out!"

Clif opened the door. Snarler retrieved his hat, punched out the dent in it, and stamped out of the room.

Then Clif's father touched a bell, and had Hank shown in.

The pilot entered, shuffling his feet, and twiddling his cap, and looking very sheepish.

"I suppose you know why I've sent for you, Hank?" said Mr. Jackson sternly.

"Haven't the slightest idea," answered Hank, looking up at the ceiling.

"Yesterday afternoon you absented yourself from the testing-ground when you had a crowd of machines to test. I can't allow that sort of thing. It sets a bad example to the staff. You're fired!"

And then Clif butted in.

"Guv'nor," he cried, "I can't stand seeing Hank teased like that." He caught the pilot by the hands. "Hank, you're leaving testing to take over another job. I told my dad about what happened at City Road yesterday and why you left duty for a little while. I asked him to let me have you as trainer for the team, and he consented. You're going to get a rise, Hank, and you're going to train the City."

CHAPTER 4.

Butterflies v. Belton;

IT was a long beat either by road or rail to Belton. When the only half-filled excursion train left the town carrying with it what remained of the City's once great army of followers, the City team was not on board. No compartments had been reserved. No hotel

accommodation had been provided for the players at Belton after the game.

The papers printed the sensational news that the team from the Butterfly Works, properly signed on, was to play in the City colours.

The Belton manager, phoning through to City Road for particulars, had been informed that the team would arrive in due time.

In the town people were talking. Nobody had seen the team start. It had not gone by road last night or early this morning. It had not gone by train. Someone had seen Clifford Jackson—Young Thunderbolt—going into the Works just when the workers were streaming out. The weather was bad, with plenty of rain and gusty wind and poor visibility, and it was a bad look-out for the Butterflies.

The gates at the Works were shut. And yet, in a room inside, lunch was being served to a team of bright-eyed, sun-tanned, hefty youngsters, who had brought their bags and football kit with them, and were going to play the Belton Rovers at Belton.

In the hangars attached to the testing-ground all was bustle and activity. There, a team of mechanics under the able direction of Hank Parsons were preparing a team of Butterfly Minor two-seater dual control planes for a run. As the lunch ended, the machines were wheeled, one by one, out on to the flying ground, where they made a beautiful picture in the pouring rain.

They made up a fleet of six.

"Boys," laughed Hank, "Young Thunderbolt and me are going in the red bus. I taught the kid to fly, and he's an ace. The rest of you can pair off how you like. Now we'd better be off!"

Twenty strides he took. His men, finding the engines of the red air-bus purring sweetly, turned away to tune up some of the others which were not doing quite so well. Then suddenly—Bang! Flash! Crash!—the entire engine of the red plane was blown clean out of the bus, which collapsed, and turned right over.

"Foul play!" bawled Hank, as he came racing back. "Stand clear of those other buses, boys, in case they've been doctored, too. Get another Minor ready, and thoroughly overhaul every machine before we start. It's gotta be done, even if we miss the match at Belton!"

Then Mr. Harland Jackson came running up to Hank. His face was white.

"What was it, Parsons?" he asked.

"Explosion, sir. Someone must have put a bomb in the plane. Starting the engine set it off."

"Anybody hurt?"

"No, sir."

"See that every machine is safe before you go up, Hank. Look after my boy. Leave me to examine the wrecked machine. I'll get the police along here at once. But you'll have to make a start if you don't want to miss the game at Belton."

Under cover of the excitement the man on the roof of the hangar let himself down into the shed and slipped away.

With only an hour left before the kick-off at Belton, the Butterflies, ready dressed in their football kit, climbed into the Butterfly planes.

Meanwhile, the crowd waiting for the game in the stand and on the terraces of the Belton ground, miles and miles away, had learned that the Butterflies were coming by air-plane.

Suddenly brazen loud-speakers let it be known that one of the football planes had been blown to pieces, delaying the start. Two of the players; it was stated, had been killed. It was left to Clif later, to give that rumour the lie.

"A team of boys from a Plané Works, brought by a fleet of air-planes!" barked the Belton manager. "It's crazy madness! They won't be able to play when they get here! It ought to be stopped!"

It wanted only fifteen minutes to the kick-off. The Butterflies' team had not arrived. Judging from the black clouds and the teeming rain they would never arrive. Even with a foolproof compass how could they make it?

Suddenly out of the grey flashed a plane with a streamer trailing out behind it.

"The Butterfly team!" the crowd read on the fluttering streamer.

Right over the football ground the plane flashed, closely followed by a second, a third, a fourth, a fifth, and a sixth. Straight to the Belton aerodrome they flew and came down safely there.

Out of the airplanes tumbled a team of excited and anxious footballers, followed by Hank Parsons, the trainer.

"Get my S O S?" yelped Hank. "Got that fleet of Bentleys ready. Right-y-ho, scout! Get inter the buses, boys, and let's beat it!"

The Bentleys drew up near the landing ground. Into them leapt the members of the Butterflies' team. As the cars moved off each driver stuck in a prominent place in the front a flag which had been handed him.

"The Butterfly team," the flags announced, "fly in Butterfly planes."

The cars did the journey between aerodrome and football ground in record time. Even as the referee was glancing at his watch, and beginning to worry because it was a minute to starting-time, Clif Jackson led his team on to the field amid a roar of cheering which shook the stand.

They were a team of eager-faced, ruddy-cheeked, well-built youngsters, who loved the game they were going to play. And if the Belton team thought at the start that they were going to have an easy task they very soon changed their minds.

Following upon a Belton attack, Hank Parsons, standing up, with cupped hands to his mouth, bellowed out:

"Now then, the Butterflies—play up the 'Flics!"

Dribbler Hanson, Clif's chum, the centre-half of the team, had the ball at his feet just then. A feint, a tackle, and he was away, to draw the Belton men and slip the ball to Young Thunderbolt's feet right in front of goal.

The rain was slanting down into Young Thunderbolt's eyes; but he made no mistake, hitting the ball well and truly, and it was in the back of the net before the Belton goalie's falling body had touched the muddy ground.

Clif's father was seated by the fire, listening to the wireless when the football results came through:

"The City Butterflies' team, 4; Belton, 1. Belton scored from a penalty. The Butterflies' team flew home by air-plane."

THE END.

(Look out for another corking yarn of Young Thunderbolt in next week's GEM. You'll vote it the real goods!)

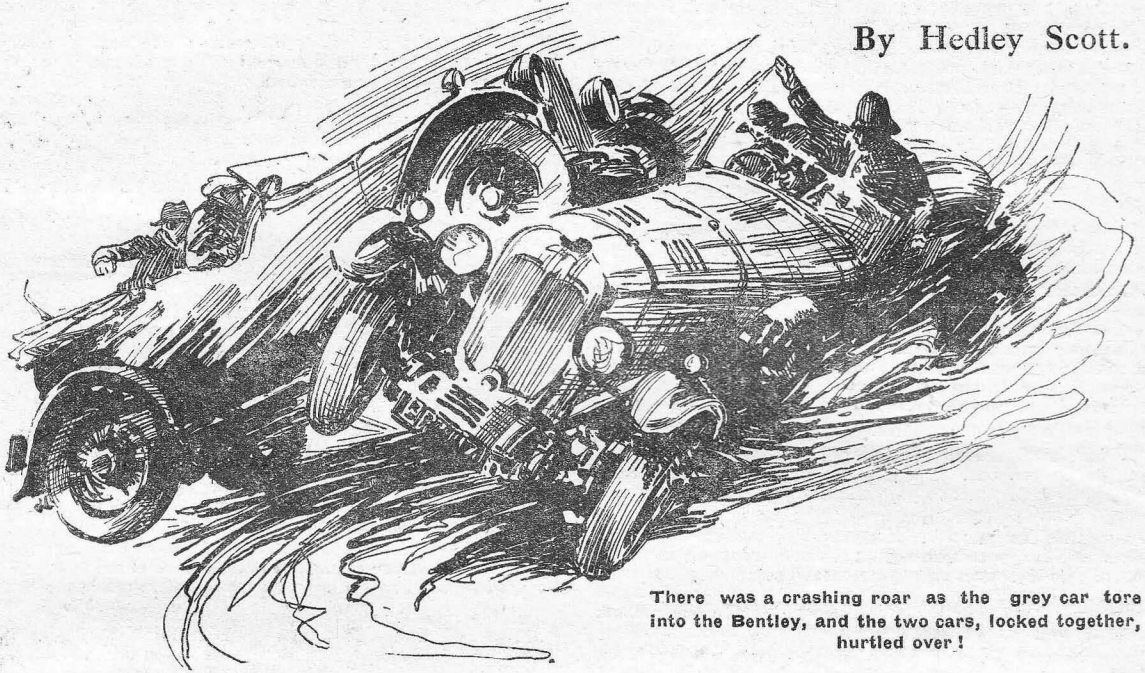
With a roar the whole engine of the red plane was blown clean out of the bus.



FURTHER CHAPTERS OF OUR RIPPING RED-HOT SERIAL!

THE RANGERS' RECRUIT!

By Hedley Scott.



There was a crashing roar as the grey car tore into the Bentley, and the two cars, locked together, hurtled over!

Balked!

"SO much for 'im!" The coffee-stall keeper prodded Bill's recumbent figure with a heavily shot foot. "He fairly asked for it. Yes, sir?"

Quite unconcernedly he continued with his business, bestowing, very occasionally, a glance at Bill's still figure sprawled on an iron seat but a few yards away from the stall, whither two of the loafers had dragged it.

"Coffee, sir? Certainly, sir!"

As the buzzing in Bill's head subsided, he became aware of a familiar voice close at hand. It proceeded from the coffee stall, and a glance in that direction gave Bill a picture of a tall individual in evening dress who sported a monocle—Marchant Buxton!

That the dandy was well-known to the coffee-stall keeper was very apparent by his careful obsequiousness and the stray pieces of conversation that reached Bill's ears.

"Missed you last night, sir," said the coffee-stall keeper. "An' we don't like to lose a reg'lar in these 'ere 'ard times, sir."

Buxton laughed, then his gaze turned to the shabby figure on the seat.

"Good gad!" he ejaculated, recognising Bill at once.

"Know 'im, sir?" It was the coffee-stall man. "Bit of no good if yer asks me. Came a bit fresh with me 'e did, an' one of the boys socked him a quieter!"

"Yes, I fancy I know him," said Buxton, with a gleam in his eyes. "By thunder, his old man will be pleased to know how he's going along. Ha, ha!"

And before Bill's scattered senses had returned, or before he could drag himself from the seat, Buxton had entered his two-seater car, drawn up by the kerb, and disappeared in the gloom of the night.

Bill sauntered over to the coffee-stall, with deadly menace in his eyes.

"I'm looking for the sportsman who put me out," he said smoothly.

The coffee-stall proprietor's sangfroid deserted him. His "boys" had gone and likewise his valour. He tried conciliatory methods.

"Now, don't you get 'uffy, mister!" he began. "I don't reckon George meant to 'it you so 'ard. And if you'll take

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a tip from me you'll not go lookin' fer 'im. 'E's mighty useful with 'is dukes, 'e is!"

Bill grimaced and showed the coffee-stall keeper a bunched fist.

"Will you tell your friend George from me that this fist is going to change the shape of his face when I find him, the cowardly dog! No, you needn't cower back. I wouldn't waste my time hitting you! I'd kill you if I did!"

The coffee-stall keeper's face expressed relief. There was a something about this brawny fellow that was terrifying.

Pulling his coat about him, for the night was cold, Bill strolled along the Embankment, a prey to gloomy thoughts. His whole world had tumbled about him. The demoralising effects of hunger and unemployment had wrought a change in him that would have alarmed his stern old father could he have witnessed his plight.

But from the day of their parting Bill had not communicated with him; and even in his present extremity his pride forbade that he should apply to old man Hartley for assistance.

Looking for work in the great city had been comparable to looking for a needle in a haystack. The labour market, full to overflowing, had no opportunities to offer to a young man with a fair knowledge of Latin and Greek.

Bill had found that out speedily enough, and with the realisation had come the reflection that old man Hartley had indeed wasted his money on an extravagant education. Of office-routine, ordinary book-keeping, and such like, Bill Hartley, late of Oxford, knew nothing.

True, one man in the City had promised him a job in his stockbroking office, but on the day Bill presented himself for duty the managing clerk had quietly but firmly intimated that the "boss" had changed his mind—that the vacancy had been filled by someone with more ability than Bill possessed.

Later, Bill was to learn that Marchant Buxton had been responsible for that last-minute change in the mind of the City man, for Buxton was a man of substance and was capable of pulling several strings when it suited him.

So deep in reverie was Bill as he sauntered along that he failed to hear a sharp intake of breath from the deep shadows of one of the bays that form a feature of the

**SMASH AND GRAB 'EM—
The Bandits' Motto!
But Bill's Is—
SMASH AND NAB 'EM!**

Embankment. Neither did his eyes, usually so alert, perceive the crouching forms of three men.

He was aware of their presence, however, in the next fraction of a second, for at a muttered command the three leapt upon him. Something struck Bill a sickening blow at the back of the head. Instinctively he brought up his arm to ward off a second which he anticipated would fall. There was a thud, and the blow all but numbed his arm. Then up came Bill's left and a devastating punch sent one of his assailants reeling into the brick parapet.

"You cowardly rotters!" Bill's fighting spirit was roused now. "Come on!"

"Out 'im!"

Two of the roughs advanced to the attack what time the fellow sprawling against the parapet sought his second wind and a second instalment of courage.

Biff! Smash! Left and right rocked the foremost attacker, then a vicious half-swing lifted him literally off his feet.

"What's all this?"

The helmeted figure of a policeman showed through the gloom, and, like rats seeking to escape from a trap, the three mysterious assailants made a break for freedom with the swiftness of light.

When the policeman came fully upon the scene he saw the dishevelled figure of Bill Hartley, panting for breath, and smoothing his damaged knuckles.

"What's the trouble?" inquired the policeman.

"Blest if I know, officer," said Bill. "Three curs jumped out at me from this bay, and by the way they went about it one would almost think that they intended to do me in properly. However"—he exhibited his bruised knuckles—"I fancy two of them at least have cause to remember me!"

The policeman laughed, and ran a critical eye over Bill.

"You seem to be having a rough time of it, mate," he said. "If a bob is any good—"

Bill felt his face flush crimson. The offer sprang from a kindly heart, as he knew; nevertheless, he could not find it in him to accept.

With mumbled thanks, he took leave of the policeman, and trudging westwards was soon swallowed up in the gloom.

The kindly policeman stood gazing after his retreating figure.

"Now he was a gentleman," he confided in himself. "Not one of your usual down-and-outs. Wonder what his trouble is? He looks decent enough."

But Bill was but one of many "mystery men" trudging the streets of London who looked decent enough but had troubles to hide, so dismissing him from his mind the constable tramped on his way.

Meantime, Bill wandered westward, conscious now of the growing ache in him that cried for food. But in speculation as to the reason of the attack upon him even hunger was a secondary matter. Who could have prompted that attack? What was the motive? He hadn't any money to justify an attack with intent to rob. He hadn't an enemy in the world, he told himself. Not one—

With the reflection came a mental picture of Marchant Buxton. Yes, there was one enemy. But not even with the wildest stretch of imagination could Bill connect Marchant Buxton with that ferocious and mysterious attack upon him.

"Give it up!" muttered Bill. "But it's obvious that someone is after my blood. I must keep a sharp weather eye open."

Whistling softly, he strode on, a whimsical fancy taking him along Regent Street.

Amid the monotonous bustle of motor-cars and buses, motor horns, and a nerve-shattering roar from a pneumatic drill, rose a clamour of voices.

"Thieves!"

"Stop them!"

"Stop that car!"

"Smash-and-grab raiders!"

Followed the powerful blasts of police whistles. Above it all screamed the vibrant note of a powerful car-engine under full acceleration.

Turning, Bill saw a long, grey shape hurtling towards him from a block of traffic. At the wheel of the car sat a hunched figure, with a felt hat drawn down over the forehead. Behind him sat an elderly gentleman of most disarming appearance.

"Stop that car!"

Voices rose on all sides, but as is common with crowds in a similar emergency it was some time before anyone did anything but shout. By that time the long grey car was almost out of sight.

A policeman came running towards Bill. Unaware of the fact, Bill had come to a halt beside a Bentley sports car that was standing at the kerb.

"This your car?" The policeman panted the words, with hardly a glance at the shabby person to whom he addressed the question. "Will you follow 'em?"

Hardly knowing why, Bill replied in the affirmative, and then surprised himself by jumping into the driving-seat. The policeman, whistle between his lips, leaped in after him. The starter purred, the engine sprang into rhythmic life, and the Bentley shot away from the kerb in pursuit. By this time the grey car was out of sight; but giving the Bentley full throttle Bill reached the top of Regent Street just as his quarry turned sharply to the right and raced away along Oxford Street.

"We've got him!" In his excitement the constable plucked Bill dangerously by the arm. "They're holding the traffic. He can't slip through."

But the policeman spoke too soon. All unconscious of the fact that he was letting through a dangerous smash-and-grab raider the point duty policeman waved his stream of traffic on, and the grey car was again lost to sight.

With the thrill of the chase pounding the blood at his temples, Bill settled down at the wheel. By using all of the powerful Bentley's magnificent acceleration, he narrowed the gap between himself and his quarry.

Down Oxford Street, along Charing Cross Road, across Waterloo Bridge the grey car rocked and swayed, its driver regardless of traffic signals or pedestrians. Clinging to it sped the Bentley.

Crack!

Something whined unpleasantly close to Bill's ear.

"The scum!" swore Bill's companion. "They're firing at us!"

The elderly gentleman in the grey car, balanced precariously with feet astride, was pointing an automatic at his pursuers. By reason of the rocking of the car his aim was faulty, but of his intention there was no doubt.

Crack, crack, crack!

Thrice the automatic stabbed points of fire, and three more death-dealing bullets sang perilously near Bill and his companion. But the luck held; the elderly gentleman was a foot wide of his objective.

With glinting eyes on the road ahead, Bill urged the Bentley onward. Foot by foot, inch by inch, the distance between him and his quarry was reduced.

"We're catching 'em!" roared the constable. "Good for you, sir!"

"Hold tight!" sang out Bill, between gritted teeth. "I'm going to crash him!"

"Hh?"

Bill, hunched over the wheel, coaxed the engine to give of its best. Again the Bentley responded, and now a matter of ten yards divided the swaying cars. The constable still puzzled himself over Bill's words; but enlightenment dawned when Bill swung the wheel over slightly in an attempt to race alongside the grey car.

"Sit tight!" roared Bill.

The wheels of the Bentley were on a level now with the rear wheels of the grey car. Above the whistling of the wind Bill heard the elderly gentleman in the grey car shout something to his companion. Next moment two shots, fired in rapid succession, scorched his cheek.

Bill laughed grimly.

Inch by inch the Bentley drew level with the grey car which was rocking and shuddering under such unaccustomed speed. In the fraction of a second that was left before he put his desperate plan into action Bill saw the white, strained face of the driver; heard the curse the elderly gentleman shrieked at him.

"Easy, sir!" roared the constable, thoroughly alarmed now.

But he spoke too late.

Like a living thing the Bentley leaped forward and drew clear of the grey car. The driver of the latter guessed Bill's intentions, but his knowledge did not avail him anything, although he desperately plied his brakes and tried to pull out to the crown of the road.

Suddenly Bill's wrists moved on the steering-wheel. Simultaneously the Bentley nosed into the kerb, completely blocking the way the grey car must travel.

Crash!

Like a bullet the grey car smacked into the obstacle. There was a shuddering roar, a shrieking protest of over-worked brakes, a rending of metal and splintering wood, and the grey car and the Bentley, locked together, skidded violently, and then crashed over, complete wrecks!

(Who's got the best of the deal—Bill or the bandits? Boys, next week's instalment will grip you no end. Don't miss a line of it, whatever you do!)

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The Terror of Taviston!

By W. H. Morris.

A Mystery!

MOST of us, I suppose, are like Barry Moore, always hoping for adventure, but never really expecting it to come our way. Barry's great adventure befell him in a quiet part of England, where one might have thought that nothing exciting could possibly happen.

Moore was the cub reporter on that very go-ahead paper, "The Daily Clarion," and he was sent down to Taviston, in Somerset, to write up what had become known as the Taviston Terror story. Twice within four days wealthy local men had been attacked and robbed at night. One was found dead, with his chest crushed in; and the other had been nearly strangled; and could give no account of the thing that had attacked him, beyond saying that it was enormously powerful, and had leapt upon him from behind.

Barry had been along to interview this second victim, and was returning to Taviston along a lane that went round the edge of the woods. Suddenly a scream startled him. It was dark, and white mists rising from the sodden earth made everything look rather eerie. For a moment Barry stood listening, with his heart pounding madly. Then he sprinted along the road in the direction of the cry.

The road turned suddenly, and as Barry rounded the corner, he saw a man struggling with some huge creature by the roadside. It was too dark under the overhanging trees for him to see much of the thing, but Barry had an idea that it was something monstrous, like an ape. As though alarmed by his appearance, it released its victim and plunged into the woods. Barry heard the swish and crackle of the dead undergrowth as it fled.

A man lay motionless on the ground, and at first the youngster thought he was dead. But when he felt his pulse there was a flutter of life.

Barry hesitated, not knowing whether to give chase to the mysterious assailant, or to carry his victim into Taviston.

Finally he decided that it was more important to get medical help for the injured man, and he got him on to his shoulders, and set out for the village.

As he went, he puzzled his brains anew, trying to guess what manner of creature it was that could crush a man's ribs, or strangle him. Perhaps it was a bear, or a powerful ape that had escaped from a menagerie? But even the most intelligent of apes don't attack men and rob them of their valuables. Barry felt baffled.

His burden was heavy, and he gave a sigh of relief when at last he saw the faint twinkle of yellow lights that came from Taviston. Entering the King's Head, he placed the unconscious man on a settee, whilst a badly startled landlord flustered about him asking questions.

Barry cut him short.

"Send for a doctor," he said in a breathless voice. "He may be dying. And you had better bring him some brandy."

A boy was sent for the doctor, and between them Barry and the innkeeper got the injured man to bed. When the doctor had examined the man he reported that three ribs were broken. In addition, the patient's neck was swollen and purple, and a deep gash had only just missed the jugular vein.

At length his eyes fluttered weakly open, and after he had swallowed a little brandy, he was able to speak. But he could only give them a vague idea of what had happened. He had been attacked from behind, he said, and caught in an awful, bearlike grip that had choked the cries which he had tried to utter. He had not got a proper view of his assailant, and could not describe it very well. But upon one thing he was insistent—the creature had six arms!

"Impossible!" the doctor said, and glanced at Barry as one who would say "He is delirious, I think."

"I tell you it had six arms," the man repeated, and shuddered.

And nothing would make him budge from that.

"It was something like a giant beetle, I think, and had six arms," he kept on saying.

The Terror Comes!

BARRY had arranged to sleep at the King's Head that night. But for a long time he lay awake, vainly trying to guess what the Terror could be. A beetle was absurd. Who had ever known of a beetle as big as a man? The most probable explanation was that it was an ape, trained by some criminal to attack and overpower his victims. But the six arms? That puzzled Barry badly, until he decided that the Terror's latest victim must have been so terrified he imagined the brute was six-armed.

Still thinking over the problem, he fell at last into a restless sleep. From this he awakened suddenly, with a feeling that some hidden noise had roused him. A sound coming from the french windows made him look in that direction, and his heart leapt with excitement. Dimly outlined against the faint light was a huge, ungainly figure, and for a moment he was too startled to move. It was the Terror; instinct told him that.

Then he sat up in bed, and at the same moment the figure lurched forward. There was a crash of breaking glass and woodwork as it thrust through the windows into the bed-room.

Barry leapt out of bed and stared at the Terror, hardly able to believe his own eyes. The creature had a huge oval body, that gleamed a dull, steely blue, rather like the colour of a beetle. It had no head, but six arms or tentacles, made of many-jointed metal. These ended in

bunches of thick wire, and looked like fingers.

It lurched stiffly towards Barry on two slender, jointed legs that ended in ungainly feet. These were padded with rubber apparently, for they made hardly any

Strangled by a Beetle!

At Taviston men were attacked by a strange creature of enormous strength! Some said it was a beetle! Barry Moore set out to clear up the mystery, and was almost strangled himself!

noise when they moved.

Recovering from his amazement as the Terror moved towards him, the young reporter snatched up a chair in both hands and smashed it down on the monster with all his strength. The chair splintered, but the Terror never so much as staggered.

A tentacle shot towards Barry like a steel spring, and the wire fingers coiled round his throat, choking him. Two more tentacles wound round his body, crushing his arms to his sides. Then the remaining tentacles seized his legs and hoisted him bodily off his feet. Afterwards, the Terror shouldered its way through the tangle of glass and woodwork as though it were a cobweb.

Barry Moore was no weakling, but he was helpless in that awful grip. He strove to free himself, but in vain. His senses reeled, a roaring filled his ears, and he lost consciousness.

When he recovered he lay for a few seconds with closed eyes. Then he tried to move, but found that he was tied hand and foot.

A mocking voice spoke.

"Welcome to the Gables," it said. Barry looked up to see a gaunt, hook-nosed man standing over him.

"Who are you?" he asked faintly. "Where am I?"

The stranger smiled grimly.

"I am Dr. Drood," he answered. "And you are in the house where I have spent the last four years perfecting my robot. I have brought you here to kill you because you have probed too deeply into my affairs, and I began to fear you might endanger my liberty."

He uttered his threat with such cold-blooded ferocity that Barry Moore felt convinced he would keep his word.

He forced himself to speak calmly, though his heart was hammering madly.

"Prying into your affairs," he repeated. "What do you mean?"

Drood smiled again, in a mirthless manner.

"You have been seeking to discover the Taviston Terror," he answered coldly. "I created that thing. I have spent four years working on it, and at the end found myself hampered for lack of funds. Rather than give up my scientific research work, I used my mechanical man to overpower wealthy people on the highway. When it had rendered them unconscious, I took their valuables. With the money I thus obtained, I am continuing my experiments, and hope to produce an even more wonderful robot than the one that brought you here.

"I doubt," the doctor continued calmly, "whether you would understand the technical details even if I tried to explain them to you. But the body contains a radio receiving set which enables me to control the robot's every movement from a distance. I can control the legs, and each of the six arms in this way, almost as easily as I can control my own limbs. Here"—he touched a small ebony case strapped to his side—"here is the apparatus with which I send out my wireless control waves."

Barry began to suspect that he was in the presence of a madman.

"Look here!" he said, in a rather strained voice. "You can't kill me. You will hang if you do. Inspector Rawlings, who is in charge of the investigations, is staying at the same inn as myself. He's bound to trace me here."

The doctor grinned horribly.

"Precisely what I hope, my young friend," he sneered. "The inspector also knows too much for my safety. He is even more dangerous than you are, and I should have liked to use my robot to attack him to-night. But he occupies a bed-room on the first floor of the King's Head, where even my robot could not go. So I decided to carry you off, believing that the inspector would almost certainly follow you here without delaying to get help to go with him. Rawlings is impulsive; I know him well. I—"

He broke off sharply as a bell jangled somewhere in the distance. Going swiftly across to the window, he looked out. Then he came back to Barry Moore and gagged him with a handkerchief.

"It is the inspector, and alone," he said, and bared his teeth in another cruel grin. "I must gag you, young man, lest you shout an alarm. Now I am going to trap the inspector."

He knotted the gag cruelly tight, and then hurried from the laboratory, leaving the door wide open.

Barry Moore started trying to break his bonds, but all he did was to chafe the skin from his wrists. He heard the front door slam, and a faint sound of voices.

The pain of his chafed wrists forced him to stop trying to work free of the cords that bound him. He looked about him for some sharp edge upon which he might cut the cord. Almost at once he saw a row of bottles containing chemicals, and they gave him an idea. He would smash one of them and cut through the cord on a jagged edge of broken glass.

So he rolled across to the bench, and kicked one of the bottles. It rolled to the floor and smashed, and the pale

yellow fumes of strong nitric acid steamed into the air. Barry Moore suddenly recollected that concentrated nitric acid is a powerful corrosive, and he rolled on to his side and dipped a cord into the pool of liquid. The cord began to smoke and turn black, and in a short while he felt it loosen. With a snap he freed his wrists.

Just as he did this he heard a yell of pain in the inspector's voice. Barry grabbed up an iron retort-stand, and sprinted along the passage into the front hall. Through a half-open doorway came a moaning sound, and then the grim voice of Dr. Drood.

"My dear sir, you have walked into a trap. I shall silence you, and then escape from the country—"

At that moment Barry kicked the door wide open, and saw that the inspector was gripped in the six tentacles of the robot. Dr. Drood was regarding him with a malicious grin; but he turned, snarling like a wild beast, when Barry entered.

Then his hand dropped to the control-box and pressed a small lever. Instantly the robot released the inspector, who dropped, half-fainting, to the floor. The next moment the Terror lurched at Barry, the six tentacles stretched towards him.

Barry yelled, and leapt aside, so that one of the tentacles just brushed against his chest. Like a flash, Dr. Drood snapped down another lever, and as though the robot were a living creature, it wheeled swiftly in its stride, and lunged at Barry again. A second time the young reporter dodged it, striking this time with the iron retort-stand. But the blow made no impression on the metal body of the robot.

Suddenly Barry Moore changed his tactics. He vaulted across the table, and was on Drood before the man guessed his intention. The doctor sprang backward with a startled cry, and at the same time Barry hit out with the retort-stand. The heavy iron base struck the little control-box, smashing through the thin ebony top, and laying bare a web of wires and mechanism. There was a sudden whirr, and the youngster felt a mild electric shock. Then the robot staggered against the table like a drunken man, and fell with a crash to the floor, where it lay perfectly still.

Dr. Drood sprang for the door, but Barry was on him like a panther. They went down together, Drood undermost, and though the man fought with a savage strength, even biting in his rage, Barry Moore pinned him down till Inspector Rawlings recovered sufficiently to come to his help. Between them they snapped the handcuffs on the man.

The detective sobbed for breath. Then he squeezed Barry's arm in a big, hairy paw, and gasped:

"Thanks, son! You saved my life!"

"Don't mention it," Barry answered. "Gosh! What a story this is going to make! What a scoop!"

For, good reporter that he was, Barry Moore thought more of a good story than he did of his own life.

THE END.

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