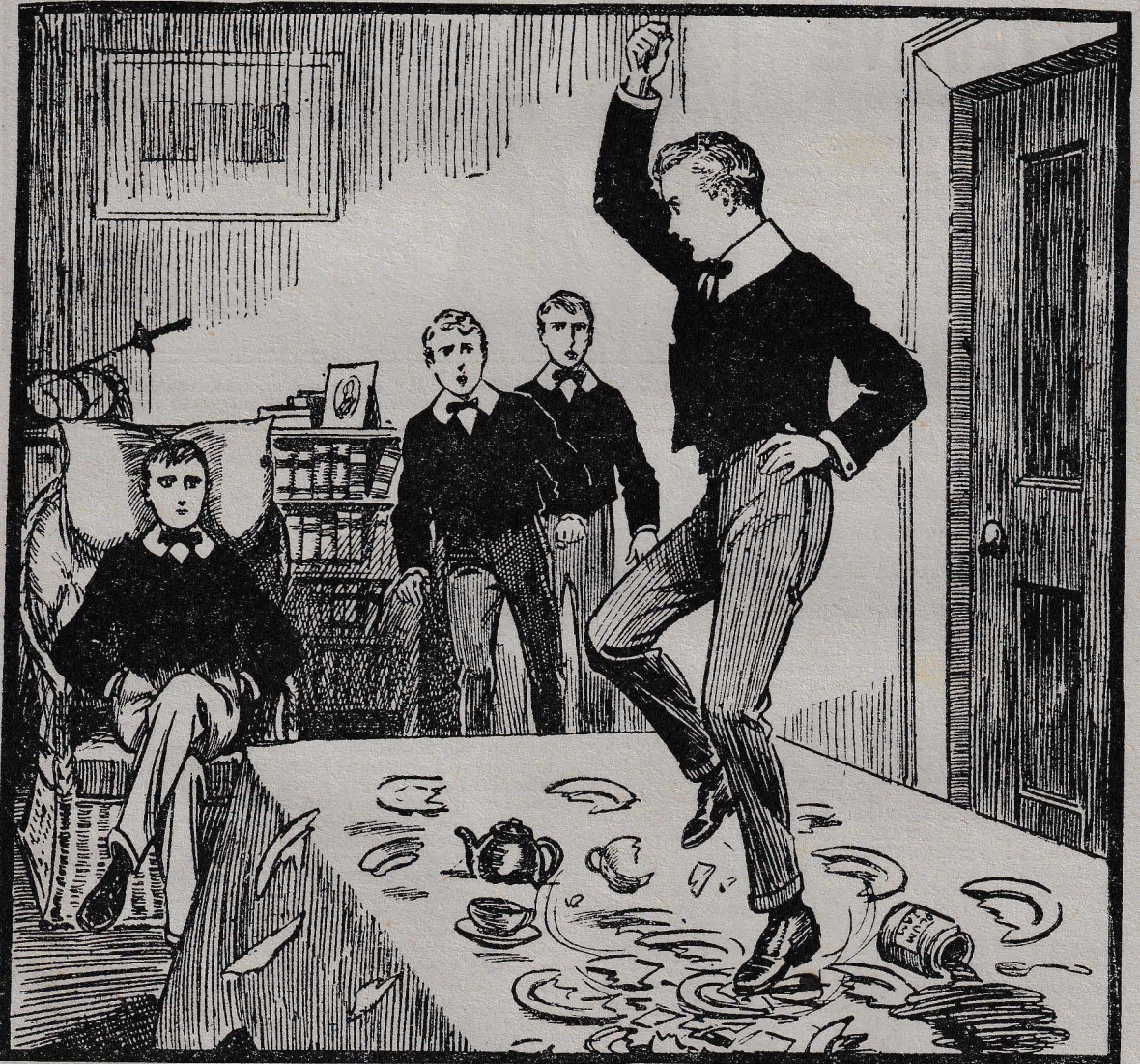


THE PAPER THAT CHEERS YOU UP!

The
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3 Grand
Complete
Stories.

NUMBER 202.



MONTY LOWTHER UNDER THE 'FLUENCE!

(An exciting scene from "The Schoolboy Hypnotist," one of the Three Grand Long Complete Stories contained in This Issue.)

A FORTUNE AT STAKE!

A Magnificent Long, Complete
Story Dealing with the Further
Amazing Adventures of

SEXTON BLAKE,

the World-Famous

DETECTIVE.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Shadows on the Blind—The Rescue
—Shelter.

"THERE isn't much fun in this,"
said Tinker. "Have you really
no idea where we are?"

"I have more than an idea,"
Sexton Blake answered, in a
moody tone. "I know that we are some-
where between Halesworth and Beccles.
But that knowledge is of no use to us,
since we may have got completely turned
around in the last hour."

"I thought you could find your way
anywhere about England?"

"So I can, my boy, when familiar land-
marks are visible. But as I am not an owl, and cannot see
in the dark, I happen to be at fault on this occasion."

"It's a beast of a country, guv'nor. What are we going
to do?"

"We will keep on to the top of the hill, and then, if no
welcome light of a habitation is to be seen, I will consult my
map again, and make another attempt to pick out the course
we have come by."

Sexton Blake and his young assistant were on a short tour
in East Anglia, travelling in the former's motor-car. Having
left the old town of Ipswich late that afternoon, the beauty of
the country had tempted them away from the main thorough-
fare, and they had found themselves, after sunset, in one of
those lonely regions of Suffolk where for miles stretch nothing
but bracken and heather, dotted with a few clumps of trees.

They had been confused, doubtful of their route, when night
settled down upon them, and now, utterly lost to all sense
of direction, with no sign of a dwelling anywhere in sight,
they were ascending a fairly steep slope. It was impossible to
seek guidance from the stars, for inky clouds had overcast the
sky, and, to make matters worse, there were indications of a
storm. The air was breathlessly calm, faint gleams of light-
ning were quivering on the horizon, and at intervals the low,
sullen mutter of thunder could be heard in the distance.

"Here we are," said Tinker. "Two or three more yards
will do it."

"And now for that confounded map!" declared the detec-
tive. "I'll have another go at it."

It appeared, however, that there would be no necessity for
them to have recourse to the map, which had previously
puzzled both, for a moment later, as the car came to a halt
on the brow of the hill, after turning sharply to one side,
there were seen on the other side, down in a hollow, two
lighted windows that evidently belonged to a house of con-
siderable size. The one on the ground floor, which had heavy
curtains drawn across it, revealed its square bulk only dimly,
but the one on the floor above, screened only by a thin blind,
shone out brightly and clearly.

"What a lonely place for a dwelling!" observed the lad.

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"Help me, whoever you are!" cried the woman, reeling towards
the approaching rescuers. "Oh, save me—save me!"

"There are plenty of homes just as lonely in this part of
the country," replied Sexton Blake, "and the more isolated
they are the more they appeal to the lost traveller. What
an attractive sight this is after our troubles!"

"It suggests a good dinner and a bed, guv'nor."

"I have no doubt that both would gladly be offered to us.
As I want to get on to Halesworth, however, we will not
accept any hospitality. You had better stop here while I go
down and ask the way. I will also inquire if there is an inn
that can be easily found, for it may be impossible for us to
get as far as Halesworth. If that storm should come this
way—"

"What's that?" broke in the lad. "I say, look there!"

"I see!" murmured Blake. "Curious, isn't it?"

Both were silent, gazing down at the house in the hollow.
At the upper window, against the illuminated blind, there
had appeared a moment before the black shadow of a woman,
who had torn the blind partly aside, and seemingly made an
effort to open the casement. She now swung round, just as
two more dark figures loomed behind her, and then followed
a dumb pantomime that was brief and thrilling.

The woman raised one arm, and in her hand was an object
that looked like a revolver. The two figures leapt towards
her, but withdrew when she darted at them, brandishing the
weapon manfully. For several seconds all three melted
into a confused blur, and as Tinker and the detective watched
the strange shadow-picture from the top of the hill, they
wondered what could be taking place in the lonely dwelling
below them. And as they were staring raptly, before curi-
osity had turned to alarm, the figure of the woman detached
itself from the others, and sprang back to the window.

"She is in danger!" exclaimed Tinker.

"By heavens, look!" gasped the detective.

The two other figures—they were those of men—had again
advanced upon the woman, who had seized a chair, and was
keeping them at bay. Having struck at her assailants and
driven them back, she quickly availed herself of her oppor-
tunity, and dealt a swinging blow at the window. The blind
was seen to drop, and there was heard the tinkle of breaking

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glass. The casement had been forced open, and the woman was in the act of jumping out.

"Help, help!" she screamed loudly.

With that she took the leap and disappeared, and at the same instant a man's voice rang savagely on the night:

"After her, Mauley! To the stairs!"

The whole of the little drama had transpired in a very short space—in almost less time than it takes to tell—and now, as Sexton Blake and his young assistant woke from their stupor of surprise, they sprang from the car, and went tearing side by side down the hill. They knew that the woman was in peril, and their sole thought was to save her, risk or no risk.

"She may have broken her neck!" Tinker said hoarsely.

"Or at least crippled herself!" answered the detective.

"She must be lying there helpless on the ground. Quick, my boy!"

The two men had promptly vanished from the room beyond the lighted window, but it could not be doubted that they were descending the stairs, and the fear that they would succeed in their sinister object urged Blake and the lad to their utmost speed. Blindly, slipping and floundering, they hastened through clogging bracken and heather to the bottom of the slope, where they vaguely perceived a road. And as they sprang across it, towards a low wall that bounded a garden, the slim, dusky figure of a girl scrambled over a gate a couple of yards to one side of them. She fell, rose to her feet, and reeled towards the approaching rescuers, whom she could indistinctly see.

"Help me, whoever you are!" she cried. "Oh, save me—save me! Don't let them—"

"Catch her, guv'nor!" bade Tinker, as the appeal ended in a sob. "She is fainting!"

The girl swayed, and dropped, swooning, into the outstretched arms of the detective, who threw her across his shoulder. The two men had by now emerged from the house, and were seeking for their intended victim.

"She is not here, sir!" exclaimed one. "She couldn't have hurt herself!"

"To the gate!" replied the other, with an oath. "We must find her, Mauley! She mustn't get away!"

Footsteps could be heard pounding over the gravelled path, drawing rapidly near. Beyond the wall was had a glimpse of two vague, moving forms.

"Here they come!" said the lad, in a tone of despair. "And we haven't a weapon between us!"

"We must run for it!" was Sexton Blake's reply. "Keep close to me, my boy! We'll do our best!"

The situation was critical, but they trusted that they would be able to escape under cover of the darkness. Up the steep hillside they went as fast as they could, the detective clinging to his unconscious burden. They could not shake off their pursuers, however. Behind them, as they fled, rang husky shouts and fierce imprecations, and before they had gone more than fifty yards, as they were still tripping through the tough heather and bracken that clothed the hill, a vivid flash of lightning revealed them clearly to the two men, who had been holding to the same course, guided by the rustling footsteps of the fugitives. A revolver cracked, and the ball whistled by the detective's ear.

"We had better stop and tackle them!" panted Tinker.

"It would be folly to do that!" Blake answered. "They would shoot us both! Faster, my boy, faster!"

On they floundered, mounting steadily higher, straining every nerve. Again, and yet again, the purple lightning blazed around them. A second shot was fired, and it narrowly missed the lad.

"You'll have to do better than that, sir!" exclaimed one of the pursuers. "Have another try!"

"No, I'll wait till we come to closer quarters," his companion replied. "They can't get away from us."

"Who can they be, sir?"

"I have no idea, Mauley. Probably a couple of tramps who have been lurking about."

The chase continued, and now Tinker and the detective felt more hopeful of escaping from the pursuing men, for it seemed likely, since they knew nothing of the car that was waiting above, that their ignorance would frustrate their murderous intentions.

And so it proved. Being confident of overhauling the girl's rescuers, the men did not fire any more shots, nor did they press up the slope as rapidly as they might have done. They were still a dozen yards in the rear when the fugitives gained the crest of the hill, and at once Tinker, who had pushed a little ahead of his master, rapidly started the engine, vaulted into the car, and grasped the wheel; and when Blake sprang in after him half a dozen seconds later, with his burden in his arms, the lad got into gear, and the vehicle responded like a thing of life.

"Thank Heaven!" gasped the detective.

"Hurrah, we're off!" Tinker shouted joyously. "Here we go!"

The fleet air rushed by them, and they heard frenzied cries of rage from the baffled pursuers, who, topping the slope a trifle too late, immediately discovered how they had been cheated. Crack! Crack, crack! Crack! Four revolver-shots were fired, but the bullets flew wide of the mark, and did no harm.

The angry clamour faded to silence, and shortly afterwards, as the car was dashing on with increasing speed, the summer storm burst in all its fury. A gale rose, and the rain poured in torrents; lightning played incessantly, and thunder crashed like big guns. But the rescued girl was not exposed to the elements, for Sexton Blake, warned of the approach of the tempest, had hastily wrapped her in his mackintosh.

"Where to?" asked Tinker.

"Anywhere, provided you keep to the road," the detective replied. "We may come to a farm or an inn before long. Be very careful."

"Right you are, guv'nor! How is the young lady?"

"I believe she is still in a swoon, my boy. We must find shelter for her as soon as possible!"

What was the mystery of that lonely house in the hollow? What tragedy had shadowed the life of the young creature who had been saved from her enemies?

These questions puzzled Blake and the lad, but conjecture was vain, and they could only wait for the truth to be revealed to them. In the teeth of the storm, while the pelting rain fell, and thunder and lightning rent the inky heavens, the car went swiftly, blindly on for several miles.

As yet there was no sign of a habitation. In all directions, shrouded in impenetrable gloom, stretched the wild, waste heather-lands of Suffolk, swept by a moaning, shrieking gale. The lad was at the wheel, and the girl was nestled close to Sexton Blake, whose arm was around her waist; a strayed lock of her hair touched his cheek, and her fragrant breath played on his face. But she was no longer unconscious. She had recovered from her swoon, and suddenly she raised her head.

"Where am I?" she asked, in a tremulous voice. "Oh, let me go! Have mercy! Please don't—"

"Don't be frightened, my dear child," the detective interrupted. "You are with friends. We saw you jump from the window, and when we got down to the road, you were climbing over the gate. You remember, surely?"

"Yes, I remember now. Thank you so much. But where are those wicked men?"

"They are miles away. You have nothing to fear from them."

"Are you certain of that? I am afraid they will—"

The girl's voice choked, and she could say no more. She burst into tears, and wept quietly for a few moments, while the motor-car throbbed cautiously on through the drenching rain; and then, as it shot by a belt of woods, and swung to the left at a curve of the road, a welcome sight was revealed to the travellers—a lighted window, with red curtains, and a creaking, swaying signboard, on which was a black swan floating on a purple lake.

"Here's an inn, guv'nor!"

"Ah, what luck! Pull up, my boy!"

The car slid on for a few yards and stopped. Blake stepped out with the sobbing girl in his arms, and the lad, striding ahead of them, mounted to the porch of the little tavern, and threw open a door, disclosing to view a snug and empty tap-room. They had found a refuge from the storm, and when they had passed inside, and were shaking the water from their caps, an elderly woman appeared, and greeted them with a smile that bespoke hospitality and good cheer.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

At the Black Swan—Linda's Story—The Fire.

THE Black Swan Inn, as it was called, stood on a lonely common, at a distance of seven or eight miles from the town of Beccles. Having gathered that information, and turned the rescued girl over to the care of the kindly landlady, Sexton Blake and the lad had seen to the putting up of the car in a shed, and had ordered a warm supper, and had then got into dry clothing, their bags providing a change.

And now, a couple of hours after the arrival of the little party, they were sitting in a small and cosy parlour, around a table on which were the remains of a meal that they had attacked with keen appetites. The storm was over, and stars were peeping through the scudding clouds. Linda Ormsdals had recovered from the shock caused by her terrible experience, and was quite at her ease with her new friends, who had won her confidence. She made a charming picture as she sat in a big chair, with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, relating her story to Tinker and the detective, who were listening with keen interest.

Having spoken at length of her parentage and of her life in British Columbia, and of the events that had separated her from her brother and sent her down to Edmonton, the girl had told briefly of the motive that had brought her to England, and of her journey by rail across the continent to Quebec, whence she had sailed for her native land. She had landed at Southampton on the morning of that day, and on arriving at Waterloo by the boat-train early in the afternoon, she had been approached by a man who had introduced himself as John Bolton, and stated that he was a clerk to Mr. Waterlow, the Beebles solicitor.

"I was very much surprised at being met at the station," Linda went on, "for I had not answered the solicitor's advertisement. The clerk called me by name, and inquired about my brother, and when I had told him that Maurice had gone to Bitter Creek, and had asked how he had known of my coming, he explained that the passenger-list of the steamer Ontario, by which I had sailed, had been cabled to England and printed in a London paper, and that Mr. Waterlow had happened to see it. He also told me that my late uncle, Mr. Job Prendergast, had left everything to my parents, and that, as they were dead, my brother and I were heirs to a fortune. I had meant to go straight to Beebles, but Mr. Bolton said that the lawyer was at present living at Danesford Hall, my uncle's home, and that he was expected to fetch me there."

The girl paused for a moment, her eyes flashing with indignation.

"It did not occur to me, naturally," she continued, "to doubt any of the statements made by this man Bolton. I believed all that he had told me, and readily consented to accompany him. We had luncheon together at a restaurant, and then we crossed London to another big station, and travelled down to a small country station, where a closed carriage was waiting for us. It was then dark, and when we reached the house, after a drive that lasted for at least an hour, I could only see that it was a large place, standing in grounds. I was shown upstairs to a room, and told to prepare for dinner, at which I would meet Mr. Waterlow. I was still unsuspecting, and would have remained so until too late, but for a trifling and providential incident that opened my eyes. I had unpacked my little bag, and was putting some of the contents of it in a dressing-table drawer, the bottom of which was covered with a newspaper. My bracelet caught in that, and turned it partly over, and, underneath I found a number of sheets of notepaper, on which the words 'The Grange' were stamped in blue. And then it flashed upon me that I had been deceived, that I had not been brought to Danesford Hall. I was certain that I was at the Grange, which, I knew, was the name of a house belonging to my cousin, Garrick Vullamy. I remembered that my father had always mistrusted him, and I remembered also that he was the next and only heir to my uncle's estate, after my brother and myself."

"It was indeed a startling discovery," put in Sexton Blake, who had by now a pretty clear idea of the situation.

"It frightened me, I can assure you," replied Linda Ormsdale. "I am not a coward, but I felt as if my blood had turned to ice, and my heart seemed to have come up into my throat. A horrible, sickening suspicion entered my mind, and, when I had partly recovered from the shock, I noiselessly opened the door, and crept half-way down the stairs, and stopped to listen. In a room just below me two men were talking in low tones, but loudly enough for me to hear their conversation. One was Garrick Vullamy, and the other was the man who had met me at Waterloo. It appeared from what they said that they had been out in British Columbia when they heard of the death of my uncle, and that they had known where Maurice and I were living. Having gone to our little cabin and found it deserted, they had followed me to Quebec, under the impression that my brother was with me, and had there learned that I had just sailed for England. They then crossed the Atlantic by a faster boat, and arrived before I did, and had time to lay the plot that decoyed me to the Grange. And they really meant to murder me. Think of it! An old man had been living in the house, taking care of it, and he had been got rid of for the night by my cousin, so that he and his servant Mauley could safely—"

The girl paused again, agitated by the memory of the dreadful fate that had so nearly overtaken her. The colour ebbed from her cheeks, and flowed back again.

"I am not a coward, by any means," she went on, smiling at the detective, "but I think anyone would have been frightened and unnerved by what I have gone through. To continue, Mr. Blake, after hearing all that I have told you, I was simply helpless with fear for a little time; and then, when I had partly recovered from the shock, I realised that I must escape, and started back to my room to get my bag. But in my haste I tripped and fell, and the noise was heard

by Garrick Vullamy and his servant, who knew that I must have been listening on the stairs. They at once ran into the hall, and they were not far behind me when I got to my room. I could not keep them out, for there was no lock to the door, and I had no time to barricade it. I had a small revolver in my pocket—it was, unfortunately, not loaded—and with that I kept the men off until they guessed that it was empty. I held them at bay a little longer with a chair, and when I got a chance I smashed the window and jumped out. I was afraid I should hurt myself, but I dropped lightly into a thick clump of bushes, and scrambled out, and ran across the garden to the road, where I saw you and your companion. I remember calling to you for help, and after that all was a blank, until I found myself in the motor-car, rushing through the storm."

Her narrative finished, Linda Ormsdale leaned back in her chair and waited for her companions to speak. For a few moments there was silence in the room. A wrathful gleam in Tinker's eyes marked his suppressed feelings, and Sexton Blake, who had risen to his feet and was pacing the floor, was more deeply moved than he had been for months. He could not recall, in all his varied experiences, a case that had stirred him to a more fiery pitch of wrath, or roused within him a keener desire to become the instrument of justice and punishment.

"This is such a dastardly, bloodthirsty affair," he said, "that I can hardly trust myself to talk about it. You have indeed had a narrow escape, Miss Ormsdale. I feel that Providence sent us to your aid. I have no doubt that the man Mauley, who played the part of the lawyer's clerk, told you the truth in regard to your uncle's estate. You may believe that it belongs to you and your brother, and that Garrick Vullamy's plan was to get rid of both of you, so that the property should revert to him."

"He very nearly succeeded in killing me," replied the girl, with a shudder. "How thankful I ought to be for my escape! But I am forgetting that Maurice's life will be in danger. Those wicked men know where he is."

"Don't worry about that. Your brother is in no immediate danger, since he is thousands of miles away. I will take steps to secure his safety, and, meanwhile, I will protect you, if you will trust yourself and this matter to me."

"I will gladly do so, Mr. Blake. Thank you so much for your kindness. I sorely need a friend."

"You will have one in me, Miss Ormsdale, be assured. I will drive you up to London in the morning, and put you in the care of my housekeeper, who will make you feel at home. And then I will come down to Suffolk again, and confer with the police concerning Garrick Vullamy and his rascally servant, and call upon Mr. Waterlow, the Beebles solicitor. By the way, I suppose you can prove that you are the niece of the late Mr. Prendergast?"

"I am afraid I can't!" exclaimed Linda, her eyes opening wide. "Will that be necessary?"

"It certainly will," the detective answered gravely.

"Then I don't know what I am to do! Oh, how stupid of me not to have thought of this! There is not a single person in England who knows me!"

"Have you no papers?"

"Not here, Mr. Blake. There is in existence a small, sealed packet of papers, which my father gave to Maurice before his death, telling him that they might be valuable some day, as they could prove who we were."

"And your brother has them?"

"Yes; he took them with him to Bitter Creek," the girl replied. "He won't lose them, for he knows their value. But how am I to get them? What is to be done?"

"I will think it over, and come to a decision to-morrow," Sexton Blake replied. "It is rather a perplexing situation, under the circumstances, and I can't see my way clear as yet. We won't discuss it any further to-night," he added. "The hour is late, my dear child, and you need rest. You must go to bed."

And he held out his hand to Linda Ormsdale, who bade him and the lad good-night, and withdrew from the room with a troubled look on her pretty face.

It was between eleven and twelve o'clock when the detective retired for the night, and it was natural, after what had happened, that his brain should carry him into a realm of dreamland, in which he had thrilling adventures with Garrick Vullamy and his servant. He was fleeing from them, running for his life over the heather, when he suddenly plunged into a zone of smoke, shot with luminous waves of red; and then, awaking with a start, he found himself sitting up, and discovered that the latter part of his dream had been only too true. His room was dense with smoke, and at one side of it he could see a lurid glow shining through the crevices of the floor.

"Great Scott, the house is on fire!" he gasped, as he sprang out of bed.

The Black Swan was a rambling, old-fashioned inn, and there was but one window—and that a small one, with diamond panes—in Blake's bed-chamber. At first he could hear only the dull roaring and crackling of flames, but by the time he had got into his coat and trousers the other inmates of the house had been roused, and there was ringing in his ears a vague tumult of shouts and footsteps.

The door suggested to him the simplest means of escape, but he could not find it, as he was in a strange apartment, and confused as well. Having groped vainly here and there, until the increasing smoke compelled him to desist, he made a staggering dash for the window. It resisted his efforts, and as he was trying to open it, tugging at the rusty catch, there flashed to his mind a sickening theory to account for the fire.

"This is Garrick Vullamy's fiendish work!" he reflected. "There can be hardly a doubt about it. That scoundrel and his servant must have followed the trail of our car through the mud! And they probably overheard our conversation in the coffee-room. They have set fire to the place with the intention of burning us all to death, and it looks as if they were going to succeed! Tinker is in peril. And that poor girl. Heaven help them!"

It was a ghastly situation. The window was still obstinate, and Sexton Blake's brain reeled under a sense of his impotency. He would have made another attempt to find the door, but the scorching atmosphere drove him back. To be suffocated, or burnt to death! The thought was maddening to him, though he felt less concern for himself than for Linda Ormsdale and the lad.

"I must save them!" he vowed. "I must escape! By heavens, I will!"

The smoke grew thicker around him, and red tongues of fire writhed up from the floor at the rear of the room as he strove desperately to force the window open. Frantically he strained at the refractory catch, hearing a shrill alarm above the swelling roar of the flames, until the heat was almost unbearable, and the smoke was choking him. And then, as he felt that he must be speedily overcome, it occurred to him that he still had a chance of escape.

He groped here and there, wild with horror, until his hands touched the back of a chair. He swung it over his head, and turned again to the window, and struck with all his might. Crash—crash! Two blows were enough. One tore a ragged gap in the leaded panes, and the other scattered the casement and beat it wide on its hinges. Panting for breath, nearly suffocated, the detective squeezed through the narrow opening into the cool air of the night. He half dropped, half fell, into a flower-bed at one side of the inn; and as he scrambled to his feet, bruised and dazed, a blurred, dusky figure sprang towards him from the shadow of a tree.

"Is that you, Tinker?" he gasped.

The reply was a snarling curse, and with that a blunt weapon descended on Sexton Blake's skull. With a stifled cry he pitched to the ground, and his senses swam into a sea of blackness.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Afterwards—Tinker Explains—Blake's Decision.

FOR two days the detective lay in a comatose state, suffering from concussion of the brain, in a small private hospital that was on the outskirts of the little town of Beccles. On the third day he recovered consciousness, and was permitted to converse for a short time; and that same afternoon, his improvement making rapid strides, he was allowed to receive a visit from Tinker, who greeted his master in a husky voice, and with dim eyes, though he tried to hide those signs of emotion.

"Well, gov'nor, here we are again!" he said, with a poor attempt at a smile. "I am glad to hear that you are doing so well."

"And I am heartily glad that you have come," declared Sexton Blake. "They have told me all they could here, but that was not enough. I understand that everybody escaped from the inn, which was burnt to the ground. I have no doubt that those scoundrels from the Grange traced us to the Black Swan, and set the place on fire, after listening to our conversation from outside the window of the coffee-room. I remember that either Garrick Vullamy or his servant struck me a brutal blow after I dropped from my bed-chamber into the garden, and from that time on, until I came to my senses this morning, my mind has been a blank. And now I want to hear about Miss Ormsdale, and to know what you have been doing."

"That's what I have come for, to tell you how matters stand," replied the lad, as he dropped into a chair beside

the couch on which his master was seated. "I have not been idle, you may be sure. I did the best I could without you, and if I have made any mistakes I'll take the blame for them. In the first place, to start at the beginning, as soon as I discovered the fire that night I went to Miss Ormsdale's room, and got her out of the inn. It was too late then to go back, so I hurried round to your window, and found you lying unconscious under it. By that time Garrick Vullamy and his servant must have bolted, for I didn't get a glimpse of them. I was worried about you, and while I was calling for help I saw the young lady—I had almost forgotten her—go dashing by on a horse which she had taken from the stable. I shouted to her, but she paid no attention."

"I can account for her flight, I imagine. It was due to the fact that she had been terrified by seeing her cousin. But what became of her? I hope you have not failed to —"

"Hold on, gov'nor! Let me tell the story in my own way. The landlady and the ostler helped to put you into the motor-car, and I drove over to Beccles, and got you admitted here. When the doctor had examined you, and had told me he thought you would be all right in a day or so, I drove back to the Black Swan. It was light by then, and there was nothing left of the inn but a pile of ashes. The next thing was to find Miss Ormsdale, and I did that, in the car, by following the hoofmarks of her horse along the muddy roads. I discovered her, before noon, in a tea-shop in a little village, where she had stopped because the horse had gone lame. She told me that she fled in terror, having seen her cousin lurking in the darkness, and that she was going straight out to British Columbia to find her brother, and bring him to England with the papers. I didn't know how to advise her, so I —"

"Has she gone?" interrupted the detective.

"Yes, she has," Tinker answered. "I had to let her have her own way. To cut the yarn short, I sent the horse back to the inn, and drove Miss Ormsdale up to town, and put her in charge of our landlady. And yesterday morning I took her down to Southampton, and saw her sail for Quebec, on her way to the goldfield at Bitter Creek."

"It was the best thing she could do, I suppose. Did she leave any message for me?"

"Yes; she sent her thanks to you, and said she hoped you would assist her when she returned with her brother."

"Go on, my boy. What next?"

"I came back to Beccles yesterday afternoon, and after inquiring for you I called on Mr. Waterlow, the solicitor, who told me that Mr. Job Prendergast had left all he was worth to his sister and her husband, and that if they were both dead the next heirs were Miss Ormsdale and her brother. And last night I went over to the Grange, to see if anybody was there, and found the place in darkness. But there is a caretaker in charge of it—an old man whom I met as he was entering the gate—and I learned from him that Mr. Vullamy and his servant had gone away with luggage a few hours before, and that they did not expect to be back for a month or so. And I left the matter at that. There was nothing else for me to do, except to wait until I was allowed to see you."

"You have done well, my boy. This news is significant and important. I fully believe that the two scoundrels are going out to Bitter Creek."

"That's just what I thought, gov'nor. But, of course, they don't know that the girl is on her way there, and she has a good start of them, for she had sailed before they left the Grange. They will travel by another boat."

"And we must follow them, Tinker."

"I was sure you would say that," declared the lad. "I can guess what their object is."

"Ah, so can I!" Sexton Blake replied, his face flushing with excitement. "It is perfectly clear. Having lost track of the girl, Garrick Vullamy has shrewdly foreseen—assuming that he overheard our conversation at the Black Swan the other night—that if he can get possession of those papers he will secure Job Prendergast's estates, since neither the brother nor sister will be able to claim it successfully without furnishing proofs of identity. Those two scoundrels are going to the goldfield to murder young Ormsdale, and rob him of the papers. And if they encounter Linda Ormsdale they will kill her as well."

"I'll bet that is the game, gov'nor. You are right."

"I am certain that I am," said the detective. "Our work is cut out for us, my boy. There is villainy to be baffled, cold-blooded murder to be frustrated. As soon as I am well enough—which will be in a day or two—we will start for Bitter Creek. How strange are the tricks of Fate! What a thrilling drama of real life has been brought to our knowledge by our motoring trip in Suffolk! We have seen the curtain fall on two acts, and when it rises again the scene will be thousands of miles away in British Columbia."

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"I wonder what will happen out there?" Tinker gravely answered.

Sexton Blake did not reply. He was silent and thoughtful, and in his eyes was a curious, straining look, as if he could see, as in a vision of futurity, the perils and adventures that awaited him in the far Canadian wilderness.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Wilderness—In Deadly Peril—Saved.

CRACK!

The shrill bark of a rifle, breaking on the solitude and silence, awoke a hundred echoes that rattled from crag to crag, from peak to peak, and died away in a low muttering. A golden eagle, gliding high in air, made a sudden dart higher. A sun-tanned youth in a red flannel shirt and buckskin trousers, who was paddling a birchen canoe down a brawling stream girt about by forests of spruce and hemlock, stared in amazement as a bullet plunked into the water a yard to one side of him. He looked behind, and to right and left, but saw nothing to indicate whence the mysterious shot had come.

Crack!

Again the weapon spoke, discharged by the invisible marksman, and this time the ball grazed the frail craft, chipping off a tiny flake of bark. With increasing bewilderment, and an angry gleam in his eyes, Maurice Ormsdale let his paddle trail while he once more scanned the wooded hillsides, his gaze roving keenly from shadow to sunlight, from dense copse to open ledge. But he looked as vainly as before. No wisp of curling smoke was visible, there was nowhere any sign of life.

"This is getting serious," he said aloud. "I can't understand it at all. What can it mean? There are no hostile Redskins in this part of the country. There may be a few outlaws or evil characters bound for the goldfield to see what they can pick up dishonestly, but they could have no reason for trying to kill me. I suppose it is some drunken, larking miner who wants to give me a fright. No, I'll be hanged if it is. No drunken man could aim so well. Who, then, can be pegging away at me as if I was a——"

Crack!

A third time the masked rifle barked, and the bullet, speeding unerringly, bored through the bottom of the canoe, leaving a little round hole, from which there at once spouted a foaming, hissing jet. And as the young man threw himself forward, meaning to thrust his finger into the puncture, his hasty movement tipped the ill-balanced craft over, and out he went, headlong, taking an involuntary dive into the crystal waters. And after him went his rifle, which had been lying at his feet.

The ruined canoe was drifting just beneath the surface, and the weapon was at the bottom, when Maurice rose, spluttering and gasping, from the depths, and shook himself like a spaniel, and began to swim. He was in a hot rage, in spite of his cooling bath.

"The infernal scoundrel!" he growled. "Wouldn't I like to get my hands on him? I hope he is satisfied with his sport, now that he has landed me in such a fix. The canoe is useless, and I shall never see my rifle again. I wouldn't have parted with it for a good bit. Confound the rascal!"

The silence remained unbroken, save for the murmur of the water, and a low, sullen roar at a distance. The eagle, circling aloft, looked down on forest and stream, seeing a picture of primeval solitude, in which the swimming figure was the only note of civilisation. Still inclined to believe that he had been made a target of by some mischievous miner, the young man progressed for a few moments towards the nearest shore. He swam slowly, and with difficulty, for the icy water was chilling him to the bone; and as he was beginning to feel uneasy, troubled by some vague apprehensions, the ominous roaring swelled louder in his ears, and sent a sharper fear to his mind.

"There are rapids below!" he reflected. "There won't be much chance for me if I am carried into them!"

The thought of his peril roused him to harder efforts, and gave him false strength; but the current had already quickened, and had him in a sucking, relentless grip. His strokes, frantic though they were, seemed to bring the shore no closer to him. In vain he struggled, battling desperately for life, as he slid faster and faster down the mountain stream, on a tide that was running like a millrace.

"By heavens, I'm lost!" he thought, with a pang of horror.

Crack! It was another rifle-shot, fired from so far off that the report was drowned by the noise of the rapids. Again and again, three more times in all, the hidden marksman pulled trigger; but the bullets flew wide, and the youth neither saw the tiny splashes that they made, nor heard the bark of the weapon. He swung on with the current, while a quarter of a mile behind him, high up on the narrow trail that skirted the wooded brow of the hill, two men gazed towards him with evil eyes as they pressed in the same direction.

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Still faster ran the tide, hissing and seething, taking a tighter hold of its victim. To right and left the shore flashed by him in a green blur, and his eyes, drawn by a ghastly fascination that he could not resist, marked the approach of the line of foam and spray that was dancing madly below him. It seemed to be leaping to meet him. Nearer and nearer came the rapids, louder and louder they roared.

"Help—help!"

It was a vain appeal, forced by terror to the young man's lips. As he cried out again an undercurrent sucked him beneath the surface, and heaved him up at the very edge of the raging maelstrom that was reaching for him like a hungry monster. With a final rush, he plunged over the brink, and in that instant all his past life seemed to rise before him. He remembered incidents long forgotten, saw as in a dream the faces of father, and mother, and sister.

Then a dim oblivion gripped him, and he felt that he was dying. Great waves pounded him, and rolled him over and over, and thundered in his ears. Now tossed high in a cascade of foam, now sent spinning into the black, boiling depths, he was borne on at mad speed, amid slimy boulders and jagged pinnacles of rock.

But as by a miracle he escaped their fatal contact, and when the rapids had done their worst with him, and had failed to crush his limbs, they reluctantly flung him out of their ravening maw, and he was seized by a slide of rippling, dancing water, which carried him down for thirty or forty yards, and shot him gently into a quiet, foam-flecked pool.

Here he floated, barely conscious, unable to make more than a feeble effort to save himself. But the eddying motion of the pool was carrying him towards the shore, which was within a few yards; and when he had drifted close to a shelving rock, under an overhanging tree, a slim, brown hand fastened on the collar of his shirt, and he was drawn out of the water, and dropped on a bed of velvety moss. He heard his name spoken, and saw through misty eyes a familiar face bending over him.

"Linda, you here!"

"Maurice—oh, Maurice!"

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Lost—A Light in the Darkness—Villainy.

YOU can say what you jolly well please," grumbled Tinker; "but it's my opinion that we are lost. I should like to know what else you can call it, when we haven't seen anything of the trail for the last half-hour."

"I will candidly admit that you are right," replied Sexton Blake. "Yes, we are lost."

"I knew we were, gov'nor. You have been pretending that we weren't."

"I was trying to keep your spirits up, my boy."

"Trying to keep your own up, more likely."

"Now then, none of that. If you give me any more of your cheek I'll be under the painful necessity of——"

The detective, who was ramming some black tobacco into a cracked briar-root, stopped to set it alight; and then he leaned against a tree, blowing a cloud of smoke, as if that was going to solve the problem which confronted him. Tinker sat down on a log, and grumbled audibly. And Pedro, squatting at his master's feet, yawned and looked disgusted.

They were a far cry from where the reader had last seen them. The summer day had dragged its course, and the soft dusk of evening, the purple mantle that heralds the approach of the sable queen of night, was beginning to shroud the northern wilderness, gradually blotting out the peaks that towered high, and stealing over the green ocean of undulating woods. The sapphire sky was powdered with golden stars. A loon called plaintively from a mountain pond, and a screech-owl answered. From somewhere in the distance floated the sound of running water.

Blake and his companions had left the little wilderness town of Stewart, bound for Bitter Creek, and had taken one of the three trails of which they had been told; but in some manner they had blundered away from it—they did not know how—and at present, after a couple of hours of aimless wandering, they were utterly at fault.

"What a fine view there is from here!" the detective said languidly. "Look at the flush of crimson colour on the horizon, and how delicious is the smell of the pine-woods!"

"I would rather see a knife and fork, and smell bacon frying!" snapped Tinker. "None of your sentimental moods for me."

"Ah, I almost forgot that we were lost!"

"I haven't forgotten it, gov'nor. What are we going to do? That is the question."

"We must push on, my boy."

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"By which way?"

"Anyway. We'll toss for it, if you like. We'll do our best to strike Bitter Creek, and if we fail we'll have to camp out for the night."

"And sit up until morning watching for rattlesnakes, and panthers, and bears. That's a nice prospect, isn't it? If I had known you were going to drag me into such a mess

The lad paused, interrupted by a low snarl from the bloodhound. It was a querulous, whining sort of a snarl, suggesting a protest against Tinker's grumbling; but that it had a deeper meaning than that was obvious to Sexton Blake, who had learned by long experience to translate his dumb friend's code-signals.

"There is somebody about here!" he declared. "Some wild animal," murmured the lad.

"No; it is a human being. I know Pedro's language."

"You are right, gov'nor. There is a faint scent of smoke in the air."

"Yes, the smell of a wood fire; and it means that there is a camp not far off."

"Here goes to find it! Come along!"

"Wait a moment, my boy."

As Blake spoke he plucked a few blades of grass, and tossed them over his head, and watched them as they dropped; and then, having thus learned the direction of what little wind was blowing, he and Tinker started briskly off, with the bloodhound at their heels. For a quarter of an hour, while the dusk of twilight faded into the blackness of night, they threaded timber and floundered through thickets.

The reek of smoke was not now perceptible to them, and they were beginning to think that they were on the wrong course, when, as they emerged from thick cover, they heard Pedro utter another low snarl, and at the same instant saw a welcome sight.

They were on the verge of a stretch of open ground that had probably at one time been denuded of trees by a forest fire, and was now clothed with a shallow growth of scrub; and across this, at a distance of seventy or eighty yards, a pale scarlet patch was flickering and glowing against the curtain of gloom.

"There you are!" the lad said eagerly. "What luck! No doubt we have stumbled on the camp of some chaps who are on the way to the goldfields like ourselves."

"Or Garrick Vullamy and his servant may be there," answered Sexton Blake.

"It might be them, gov'nor. That's true."

"No, it is not likely. I don't know why I made that suggestion. As we hurried our departure from England, and crossed the Atlantic in the fastest ocean greyhound that exists, I feel pretty sure that we got ahead of Vullamy and his servant, and that they are at least two or three days' journey behind us. And for as long a time as that, I imagine, Miss Linda Ormsdale has been with her brother at Bitter Creek."

"I suppose she is, though we didn't get any information about her at Stewart, or about her enemies either. But how long are we going to stand here? That light yonder means that somebody will offer us shelter for the night."

"Or set us right for the goldfield, my boy."

Again the bloodhound snarled in a low key, and the fur at his neck bristled as he glanced up at his master. And in his big brown eyes was an expression that Blake took to be a warning.

"The dog is uneasy," he said, "and I feel that his instinct



Pedro and the bear were fighting desperately, and Tinker, separated from them by only the length of the taut leash, was in imminent peril, menaced by the bear's outlashing paws. "Help, gov'nor!" he cried. "Help!"

is to be relied upon. We must be careful, Tinker. We will get a furtive peep at the individuals who have built that fire before we introduce ourselves to them. Be very quiet, Pedro," he added. "Don't let us have any more snarling."

He led the way on, and with infinite caution, as noiselessly as possible, they crossed the scrubby ground, towards the dim light that glowed ahead of them. As they stopped by a fringe of bushes they heard faint voices, and when they had crawled on hands and knees through the cover, for three or four yards, they paused again and crouched flat.

They had reached the brow of a hill, and from this point of vantage there was a view that at the first glimpse aroused the apprehensions of Tinker and the detective. Below them a grassy, open slope dropped steeply for fifty or sixty feet, and at the bottom of it, at a level spot partly enclosed by trees, was the camp to which the light had guided them. Here a fire was burning brightly, and the glow of the flames, over which was suspended what appeared to be a haunch of venison, shone on four men who were sitting to one side of it in indolent attitudes. They were roughly attired, and looked as if they might be prospectors. But two of them were certainly not, as the lad at once perceived.

"My word, what a discovery we have made!" the lad whispered. "I am sure that fellow on the left, sitting this way, is Garrick Vullamy. And the one opposite to him must be Mauley."

"You are right, beyond a doubt," breathed Sexton Blake, in a tone of suppressed excitement. "Yes, they fully answer to the descriptions of Vullamy and his servant that were given to us by Miss Ormsdale. And I have made another discovery, no less significant. That stalwart fellow on the right, with the bushy black beard, is Black Dan, who has of late years become notorious as an outlaw and desperado."

"I have heard of him. You met him once, didn't you?"

"Yes, five years ago, down in Arizona. He was an Indian agent then, and soon afterwards he got into trouble with the United States Government and fled to avoid arrest."

"I wonder what there is between him and Garrick Vullamy, gov'nor?"

"I don't know, but I can make a shrewd guess. Be very careful, my boy. There is some villainy brewing, and we must try to learn what it is. This is a stroke of luck."

"It is a good thing that we stopped to reconnoitre, instead of pushing straight into the camp."

"Had we done so we should now be in a very bad way," was the detective's reply, "for Black Dan has an old grudge against me."

With their rifles strapped to their backs, Blake and the lad lay there at the top of the hill, under the drooping foliage of the bushes, gazing down at the scene below them. The bloodhound, who perfectly understood that he must be quiet, was crouched between them, with one end of a leash attached to his collar, and the other end wrapped around Tinker's wrist.

Several minutes elapsed, while the four men seated by the fire conversed in low and inaudible tones; and then, as the discussion grew more animated, and the speakers raised their voices, the words floated distinctly to the alert ears of those who were listening above.

"There is some uncertainty about it, of course," said Black Dan, the outlaw, "but it strikes me that the fellow is dead."

"He ought to be," replied Garrick Vullamy, as he tapped the ashes from his pipe and produced a tobacco-pouch. "He appeared to be completely exhausted when he was carried over the falls, and I don't see how he could have escaped being drowned. But somehow or other I feel that he wasn't. I believe he went through alive, and got safely to shore, and is now at Stewart. If so, he will be returning to-morrow, by one of the three trails, and we must set a watch for him."

"I don't believe myself that he was drowned," put in Herod Mauley, "for if he had been his body would have been washed into that pool below the rapids."

"You are right," assented Garrick Vullamy. "I thought of that. Confound the young whelp! I tried my best to shoot him from the hillside, but all I succeeded in doing was to bore a hole in the canoe."

"You are talking now as though you were sorry you hadn't killed the boy," observed Black Dan, "and a bit ago you were saying that you wanted to take him alive."

"I have changed my mind, for a certain reason."

"Why don't you speak out plainly, Vullamy, instead of beating about the bush? I don't understand the game!"

"It is not necessary that you should. I've told you quite enough, haven't I? This young fellow, Ormsdale, has certain papers, which I have been wanting more than I wanted him, until something occurred to me that I hadn't thought of before. I expected to find the papers on his body after he went through the rapids. But if he is alive—and I have a strong conviction that he is—I am now anxious to get him into my power, and his sister as well. I told you about her, you will remember. I have an idea that she has left England, and is on her way out here. And I mean to keep a sharp watch for her. That is the situation as it stands at present."

"Precious little I know about it, I must say!"

"You know that I will keep my word, Dan. We stood by each other in a tight place, seven or eight months ago, and you can't doubt that I am a man to be trusted. I am sure that you are, else I should not have confided in you when we met this evening. Help me through with this business, and you shall be well paid for it."

"Right you are!" said Black Dan. "I'll be glad to have money to spend for a change, for there hasn't been anything doing lately."

"Is it a bargain, then?" asked Garrick Vullamy.

"Yes, old pal; it's a bargain!" was the answer.

With that the two men sealed the compact by shaking hands, and a brief interval of silence followed. All of the conversation had reached the ears of Sexton Blake and the lad, who glanced at each other significantly. It had been no great surprise to them to learn that these scoundrels had hatched a plot against Maurice Ormsdale and his sister, and that, as they believed, a double murder was contemplated. That was bad enough, but they were more concerned by the knowledge that an attempt had already been made on the young man's life; for they felt that he had quite possibly been drowned, in spite of the fact that his enemies held a different opinion.

They remained where they were, listening in the hope of learning something more definite, and they were so absorbed that they did not notice that the dog was showing signs of uneasiness, and sniffing the breeze that was blowing across the crest of the hill.

"There's one thing sticking in my mind," continued Black Dan. "I've met that British detective you were speaking of a bit ago, and if I thought there was any chance of his cutting into this game, I'd feel like backing out of it. I don't know, though. I owe him an old grudge, and I am keen on settling it."

"You won't get the chance!" declared Garrick Vullamy. "I am not afraid that Sexton Blake will turn up here. He gave me a lot of trouble in England, and spoilt my plans; but his infernal meddling stopped at that, and you may be sure that he is thousands of miles away. We needn't bother our heads about him."

"Let him come out here if he wants to. He'll never go back alive, you can bet! I have five trusty pals who will help me to put up a game against Sexton Blake if he should cross my path."

"There is only one of them with you, Dan. Where are the others? I meant to ask you that."

"They went off this morning to have a bit of sport. They have gone to the mining-camp on Bitter Creek, where one of our old comrades has opened a drinking saloon, and I guess they won't be back before to-morrow. I wish I was there myself."

"Was it safe for them to go?"

"Yes, for them, but not for me. I am too well known by sight."

"Speaking of Bitter Creek reminds me of something, Dan. This morning, after Mauley and I had been talking of young Ormsdale, and of our intention to cut across the hills and intercept him on his way to Stewart, we caught a glimpse of that Indian lad, Barking Otter, sneaking through the bushes. I have been wondering if he overheard us. If he did—"

Garrick Vullamy paused abruptly, shaking his head. There was another short interval of silence, and then Tinker suddenly gripped his master by the arm, and whispered excitedly:

"Look there, guv'nor!"

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Pedro and the Bear—Over the Cliff—Under Fire.

THE strip of open ground that led from the crest of the hill to the bottom was skirted on both sides by thickets and stunted trees, and just as the lad spoke there had appeared on the left, moving out from the shadowy cover, the huge, clumsy form of a bear.

Pedro had previously scented the animal's presence in the vicinity, and now, though he had been made to understand that he must be quiet, excitement got the better of him, and his sense of prudence was merged in an overpowering instinct that bade him give battle to the shaggy foe.

He was under the impression, perhaps, that the lives of those to whom he was so devoted were in danger, and that his first duty was to protect them. At all events, he at once uttered a loud, ringing bay, sprang up with bristling neck, and launched himself forward; and his impetus was so great that Tinker, around whose wrist the leash was tightly coiled, had perforce to follow. He rose to his knees as he felt the sharp tension, and then, as a second jerk dragged him over the crest of the hill, he went trailing after the bloodhound, sprawled out flat.

"I'm going, guv'nor!" he exclaimed. "Stop me!"

"Pull back, my boy!" urged Sexton Blake. "Pull as hard as you can!"

But the grass was slippery and the descent was a steep one, and the lad could neither check himself, nor get his wrist free of the leash. On he went, calling between breaths to Pedro, and calling in vain; for the excited dog, paying no heed whatever, rushed straight to the attack with convulsive bounds. And Bruin, instead of taking to flight, reared erect on his hind-legs, and in that position received the charge from Pedro, who leapt furiously upon him, and got a grip with his teeth. The next instant the two were prostrate, fighting desperately; and Tinker, separated from them by only the length of the taut leash, was in imminent peril, menaced by the bear's outslashing paws.

"Help, guv'nor, help!" he panted.

"I'm coming!" Blake answered. "Keep cool, my boy!"

He had already jumped to his feet, and started down the hill, not a little alarmed by the serious crisis that he had to grapple with; and as he was hastening to the lad's assistance, trying to unsling his rifle as he ran at reckless speed, he tripped and fell; and then, having turned a complete somersault, he rolled on towards Tinker, who had meanwhile stopped himself by digging his heels into the ground. But his hold was a precarious one, and it was immediately broken when the detective brought up heavily against him.

"That's done it, guv'nor!" he gasped. "Here we go!"

And as he spoke he and Blake were pitched forward upon the two writhing, struggling animals, with the result that all four began to descend the remaining part of the precipitous slope.

The trouble had been sudden and swift. Only a very brief interval had elapsed since the appearance of the bear, and the situation now moved with equal rapidity to a thrilling and

dramatic finish. In a confused tangle, mixed up with one another, Sexton Blake and the lad, and Pedro and Bruin, were propelled downward, rolling over and over; and as they slid on, with increasing speed, an ear-splitting chorus of angry baying and rabid snarling, mingled with shouts that rose from the level spot below, where the little group of men were standing in startled surprise, gazing into the murky gloom above them.

"What in tarnation does that mean?" cried Black Dan.

"It is a bear!" exclaimed Garrick Vullamy as he shaded his eyes with his hand.

"And a dog as well, from the sound!" put in Herod Mauley.

"They are coming straight for us!" declared the fourth member of the party. "Watch sharp! We'd better have our guns ready, Dan, for it looks as if—"

He was interrupted by a loud ejaculation from Garrick Vullamy. The tangled mass overhead, rolling on dizzily, had now come within the flickering radius of light thrown from the campfire; and the next instant, before any of the four men could reach the rifles that were leaning against a tree, Pedro and the bear took a flying leap into the camp, and landed squarely on the fire, grinding the haunch of venison into it, and scattering blazing brands in all directions. Immediately afterwards arrived Sexton Blake, his arms and legs revolving wildly; and he was closely followed by Tinker, who had meanwhile succeeded in uncoiling the leash from his wrist.

The abrupt invasion brought shrill yells to the lips of the outlaw and his companions, who had barely time to scatter right and left. Pale with fright, Herod Mauley sprang at a drooping bough and caught it, and hung there kicking. Garrick Vullamy darted to one side of the open space, and whipped behind a tree; and Black Dan, having leapt to the top of a flat rock on the other side, glanced back at the intruders.

"I know that fellow!" he cried, with an oath. "He's Sexton Blake!"

"Sexton Blake!" echoed Garrick Vullamy. "By heavens, so it is! Shoot him, quick!"

As he spoke he snatched his rifle, but he got no chance to use it, so swiftly did the situation change. The bear and the bloodhound, still locked in a tight embrace, had at once flopped out of the fire, and rolled to the farther verge of the camp, where was dense cover; and in the same direction blindly dashed Tinker and the detective, who had promptly scrambled to their feet. They dived into a fringe of thickets, which seemed to promise safe shelter; but they had no more than vanished from the sight of their enemies when they found themselves, to their consternation, tumbling headlong down a hillside that slanted like the roof of a house, and was clothed with scrubby bushes.

"We're falling, gov'nor!" gasped the lad. "We'll be killed!"

"Stop yourself!" bade Blake. "Catch hold of something!"

They were moving so fast, however, that it was impossible for them to check their descent. To the ears of those above there rose, blending with snarls and growls, a floundering, rushing noise. Then fell silence, and several seconds later was heard a succession of heavy splashes.

"That's the last of them," said Black Dan. "I reckon they'll be drowned!"

"I hope so," replied Garrick Vullamy, with a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes.

From the camp downward there extended for some yards a steep slope that ended at the brink of a sheer precipice, below which, at a distance of sixty or seventy feet, was a stream that was deep and fairly wide. Pedro and Bruin had been shot out into this dizzy abyss, closely followed by Sexton Blake and the lad, who, after going far under water, rose to the surface within a couple of yards of each other. Though they were half dazed, and had been slightly stunned by the fall, they were able to keep themselves afloat.

"Where is Pedro?" the detective anxiously inquired, when he had perceived that the lad did not need any assistance.

"He ought to be somewhere near," said Tinker, as he peered into the surrounding gloom.

"I am afraid we have lost him."

"Don't talk like that, gov'nor. I won't believe it."

There was a moment of keen suspense, and then, to their relief, they dimly saw the bloodhound close by. With a low, eager whine, he swam to his master, who fastened one hand on his collar. The two animals had become separated after striking the water, and Bruin could be heard splashing and grunting not far off; but he was invisible, and from the noise he made it was evident that he was receding, and that there was nothing to be feared from him.

"We have had a narrow escape," said the lad, "and we are not safe yet. Where shall we land?"

"On the opposite shore," replied Blake. "We will be safe over there."

"Yes; if we can reach it."

"We must, my boy, and the sooner the better. Those scoundrels can make things hot for us if it should occur to them to do so."

Side by side, with Pedro between them, they struck out with lusty strokes, cleaving the sluggish current. They had not gone far, when a rifle was discharged from up on the wooded hillside, and that was the signal for a lively fusillade. For several minutes Black Dan and his companions fired down, on the chance of hitting the fugitives, who, screened by the darkness from the sight of their enemies, were untouched by the bullets that pattered on all sides of them.

"They have had enough of it," said Tinker, as the firing ceased. "We are well out of that scrape."

"I trust that we are," the detective answered gravely. "for it rests with us to save young Ormsdale and his sister from the peril that threatens their lives."

"It seems to me that things are in a tangle," said the lad, when he had recovered breath and strength. "We must find out, first of all, whether Maurice Ormsdale is dead or alive. And the chances are that he has been drowned. Don't you think so?"

"No, I don't," Sexton Blake answered, as he languidly rose. "I have a strong conviction that he is alive, and we will act on that theory. Assuming that I am right, the situation becomes clear. To speak first of Linda Ormsdale, I am pretty sure that she reached the goldfield near Bitter Creek several days ago, and that she is now there, a fact of which her enemies are ignorant. As for her brother, we have learned that this morning, for some reason, he set out for the settlement of Stewart. We know that an attempt was made to kill him; and that, in the event of his having escaped, he would have continued his journey to the settlement. And we also know that when he returns on the morrow, as he is expected to do, he will be in danger of falling into a trap set for him by Garrick Vullamy and his companions."

"What we must do, then, is to change our plans, and go back to Stewart."

"No; it would be difficult for us to find our way back. We will push on to the mining-camp, ascertain if the girl is there, and then take steps to protect young Ormsdale from the peril that will menace him to-morrow."

"But it will be just as hard for us to find our way to the goldfield, gov'nor."

"On the contrary, my boy, it should be very easy. This stream must be Bitter Creek, and if we follow its upward course it ought to lead us, in an hour or so, to the place where the gold-seekers have staked out their claims."

"I never thought of that," said Tinker. "No doubt you are right."

"I shall be greatly disappointed if I'm not," the detective replied. And as he spoke, he led the way forward.

For two or three hundred yards, with Pedro at their heels, they pressed along the course of the stream, the dim light of the stars guiding them as they trod the narrow margin of shore that was between the water's edge and a timbered bluff that rose steeply.

And then, from behind them, and somewhere up on the opposite bank, there burst on the solitude a loud, whooping screech that was indescribably weird and bloodcurdling, charged with a human note of despair. It rang out for a couple of seconds, echoing far, and was suddenly cut short by the vicious bark of a rifle. The hound growled and shivered and bristled his neck. Blake and the lad stopped, and icy chills ran down their spines as they looked at each other.

"What was that?" gasped Tinker.

"It was the whoop of a Redskin," the detective answered huskily. "It was such a cry as a warrior gives when he sees death upon him."

"I did not know there were any Redskins in this part of the country, gov'nor."

"Nor did I, my boy."

Utter silence had fallen, and they heard nothing more. For a little time they listened, straining their ears; and then, as Sexton Blake recalled what Linda Ormsdale had told him at the old inn in Suffolk, and the remark made by Garrick Vullamy just before the appearance of the bear, a theory flashed to his mind.

"I think I can account for the mystery," he said. "That whoop of despair came from the lips of young Ormsdale's Indian comrade, Barking Otter, who must have heard Vullamy and his servant talking of their plans this morning. The Redskin has been seeking for Maurice Ormsdale, and has stumbled on the camp of those scoundrels up yonder on the hill."

"And they have killed him," declared the lad.

"I am afraid so," replied Blake. "Yes; that is what the

shot meant. We can do nothing now," he added. "Come, let us get to the mining settlement as quickly as possible. We shall find there brave and trusty men who will help us to frustrate the murderous plot that Garrick Vullamy and his wicked associates have hatched."

"It is going to be risky work, gov'nor. Black Dan recognised you, and he will do his best to settle the old score he has against you."

"I do not fear him, my boy. He will have a fresh score against me by the time I have finished with him."

They had resumed their journey as they spoke, and at a rapid pace, troubled by vague forebodings that held them silent, they pressed on through the dark night, following up the channel of the waterway that they believed to be Bitter Creek. But they were wrong, as it happened. The stream was only a tributary of Bitter Creek, and it was leading them into the heart of the trackless, uninhabited wilderness.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

The Mining Camp—The Four Villains—The Lonely Claim-

IT was on a Tuesday that Maurice Ormsdale so narrowly escaped death at the hands of Vullamy; the scene now opens after sunset on the following day, at the mushroom settlement in the vicinity of Bitter Creek, where, along the slopes of a hill, numerous claims had been staked out, and as many shacks and shanties, tents and small buildings had sprung up, including a drinking and gambling den, presided over by a stalwart Westerner named Pug McCosh, who had the reputation of being a dead shot.

With the close of the day and the fall of darkness, all labour had ceased. The sound of tapping picks and delving spades had been succeeded by boisterous laughter and brawling, quarrelsome voices. Scores and scores of fires were blazing cheerfully, and sending up into the night the fragrant incense from balsamic wood; and the ruddy flames, playing far along the hillside, shone on a motley panorama in which was fused various elements of humanity.

It was a strange, fascinating picture, this camp in the northern wilds, close to the borders of Alaska. It was an invasion of the primeval forest, a rude irruption into the hitherto undisturbed haunts of the bear and the deer.

The quest of fortune had brought all these people here, called to them across the length and breadth of a continent; and hope still ran high, though the yellow witch had not been as propitious as had been expected.

Gold had been found, but no fortunes had been made as yet. Here and there miners were watching over bags of nuggets that they had dug up from the surface layer; while others, whose claims had turned out to be of little or no value, sat in moody silence, brooding over failure. Here a man was reading a letter from some dear one he had left behind him; and there another was thinking sadly of the distant home he might never see again.

Owing to the difficulties of transport, there was a scarcity of provisions, and the few women and children who had been brought to this rough place were beginning to feel the pangs of hunger; but there was no scarcity of liquor, and it was flowing freely in Pug McCosh's saloon, in and about which were gathered most of the inhabitants of the settlement, including Black Dan's four comrades, who had not yet gone back to their leader. All were unscrupulous ruffians, and if any might be said to be worse than the others, they were the two known as Hank Smoot and Jerry the Kid.

The four had lingered at the camp, partly because of the dissipation that it offered, and partly because of certain information that had come to their ears. And to-night, while they drank and gambled, and stood treat to those who had less money than themselves, they kept furtively on the alert, and frequently overheard scraps of conversation that led them to glance significantly at one another.

The hours wore by in noisy revelry, with now and then a dispute over cards, or a fight in which pistols were drawn; and long after midnight, when dawn was not far off, and a storm was brewing, the four desperadoes slipped away from the saloon one by one, and met at a spot on the outskirts of the settlement. Here they conferred briefly; and then, heedless of the signs of the coming tempest, they

climbed to the top of the slope, and bore to one side along the ridge.

"It ought to be a good thing," said one, "if we can pull it off."

"There won't be any trouble about that," replied Hank Smoot. "We've only got a tenderfoot to deal with, and I guess he'll be too badly scared to open his mouth. What's more, he'll have sense enough to know that the law is against him."

The air was breathlessly calm, and the sky was overcast by inky-black clouds; thunder muttered far off, and flashes of lightning played on the horizon. Having pushed rapidly on for nearly half a mile, following the ridge, the sinister little party saw a pale gleam ahead of them, and advanced more cautiously for a dozen yards, when they emerged from scrub and trees on to a cleared space that had been staked out neatly, and partly dug up.

In the middle of it, behind a fire that had burnt low, was a small cabin built of logs and bark; and as the men paused, their hands instinctively slipping to their belts, there appeared in the open doorway of the cabin a slim, handsome youth, with dark-brown hair and a tanned complexion, who had evidently just been roused from sleep.

He made an attractive picture as he stood there in the ruddy glow from the embers of the fire. His flannel shirt was open at the throat, and a scarlet handkerchief was knotted closely around his neck. For a moment he gazed in wonder at the four desperadoes; and then, as he perceived that they had come for no good purpose, his cheeks flushed, and an angry light flashed to his eyes.

"What do you want here?" he asked sharply.

"That's soon told," replied Jerry the Kid, in a truculent voice. "We want your claim."

"You can't have it!" was the defiant answer.

"I reckon we will!"

"I reckon you won't!"

As the youth spoke, he made a move to step back into the cabin, with the intention of seizing his rifle; but he paused as a revolver was pointed at him by Hank Smoot, who strode close up to the doorway, with a grin on his evil countenance.

"I guess you'll change your tune pretty quick, sonny. I'll give you just one minute to clear out!"

There was a brief silence, save for the muttering of the storm. For a few seconds the young man looked boldly into the muzzle of the revolver that was pointed at his head, and then, as Hank Smoot was about to take a stride nearer, a low growl was heard, and a voice said loudly and sternly:

"That will do! There has been enough of this!"

It was the voice of Sexton Blake. He and Tinker had an instant before mounted to the top of the ridge from the opposite side, close to the left of the cabin; and they were now standing there, in the flickering light from the dying fire, with their rifles levelled at the four desperadoes, who, taken by surprise, glared wrathfully at those who had outwitted them, and regarded in consternation the huge bloodhound that was crouched by his master, his teeth bared, and the fur at his neck on end.

"If a single one of you moves a finger," Sexton Blake continued, "it will cost him his life!"

"What right have you got to chip in?" demanded Hank Smoot.

"I'll show you if you hang about here any longer," the detective replied. "Be off at once, you scoundrels, and don't come back. But wait, I can't let you go yet," he added. "I must clip your talons first. Disarm these fellows, my boy."

And he kept his rifle pointed while Tinker, with an impudent smile on his face, stepped boldly forward and took the revolvers from the four outlaws, who then, at a word of command, slunk off down the hillside and vanished in the gloom, muttering threats and curses as they went.

THE END.

(Will the great detective succeed in frustrating the evil schemes of Garrick Vullamy and his colleagues? See the splendid sequel to this week's story, which will appear in next Friday's issue. "The Redskin's Loyalty" is its title, and no reader of this week's story can afford to miss it. Make quite certain of your copy by ordering next Friday's PENNY POPULAR in advance.)

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- BY -
**MARTIN
CLIFFORD.**

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
The New Junior.

MERRY!" Tom Merry looked round at the sound of his name being called. He and his chums, Manners and Lowther, were strolling across the quad, and Mr. Railton, the Housemaster, was striding along in their rear.

Tom Merry waited for the master to approach him.

"Oh, Merry," said Mr. Railton, "I have something to say to you. There is a new boy coming to the school. He is coming from another school, where he has been in the Shell, and he will be put into the same Form at St. Jim's."

"Yes, sir."

"And he will be assigned to your study, Merry."

Tom Merry's jaw dropped.

"Our—our study, sir?" he said.

The Housemaster nodded. The juniors looked at him blankly.

Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther—the Terrible Three—had had that study to themselves for a long time, and they looked upon it as their own peculiar property. True, new fellows had sometimes been put in there with them; but always, somehow, Fortune had befriended them, and they had had the room to themselves again after a time.

They had come to believe in their good luck in this respect, and to take it for granted that they would have that room for their own private den without molestation so long as they condescended to remain the ornaments of the Shell Form at St. Jim's.

Tom Merry realised, however, that nothing could be gained from kicking against authority.

"V-v-very well, sir," he said, in resigned tones.

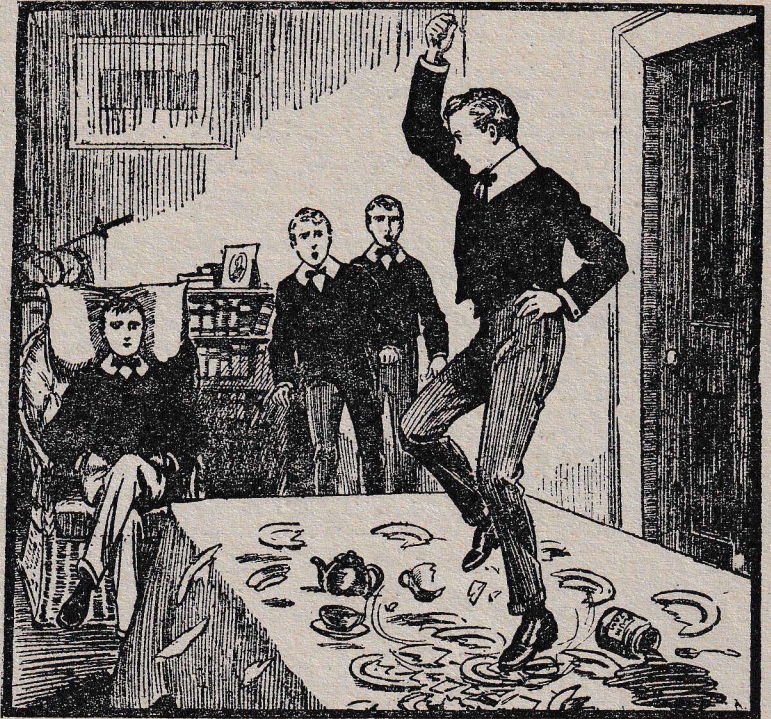
"I am sorry if your study will be a little overcrowded," said Mr. Railton quietly. "I have really no choice in the matter, however, as there have been a good number of new boys this term, and space is limited. But, Merry, I have one more word to say. I expect you to make things here quite comfortable for the new boy. I have heard of such things as juniors playing a series of larks upon a new-comer, in order to induce him to make some effort to change into another study."

Tom Merry stared.

"There must be nothing of that sort, Merry," continued Mr. Railton. "This new boy, Barber, is, I understand, a quiet and studious lad, with a good reputation from his last school. I hope you will find him a pleasant companion. I am sure you will not be guilty of any rough play towards a new-comer. I depend upon you, and you, Manners and Lowther."

And Mr. Railton marched off.

The juniors gazed at one another in amazement.



"Jump on the table!" said the schoolboy hypnotist. Monty Lowther made a spring on the table, and sent the crockeryware flying right and left. "Stop it!" shrieked Tom Merry.

"Another new kid!" groaned Manners.

"Sauce, I call it!" said Lowther.

"It's worse than that," said Tom Merry hopelessly. "Why the dickens can't they let us have our den in peace, without bunging in any more new kids? I suppose it's no good kicking up a fuss, though. There's no flouting Railton's authority."

"Suppose not."

"At any rate, we might go along and have a look at the kid," remarked Tom Merry. "For all we know he might be a decent chap."

"Right-ho!"

The juniors strode along to their study. Tom Merry flung open the door, and was astonished to see the new junior sitting in the easy-chair by the window.

"Hallo!" said the new boy.

"Hallo!" said Tom Merry.

"Hallo!" said Manners and Lowther, in heavy tones.

"I'm a new chap," the junior explained. "Mr. Railton told me this was to be my study. He said there were three fellows here."

"We're the three," said Monty Lowther. "The trouble is, we're three, and don't want to be four. Savvy?"

The new boy grinned.

"I quite understand," he said. "You want the study to yourselves. It's only natural. There isn't much room here for four, I must say."

"Oh, isn't there?" said Tom Merry, a little nettled.

"It isn't any better for me than for you," went on the new junior cheerfully. "But it's no good looking glum about it. Better make up your minds to take it serenely."

"Oh!"

"Anyway, here I am," said the new boy. "Is there any tea knocking about? I'm hungry. We used to have tea in the study at my old school. Do you?"

The Terrible Three did not answer for a moment. They began to think that their first impression of the new boy was a mistaken one. He might be slight in build, but he certainly did not lack in coolness, and in cool nerve, at all events, he was "all there."

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They began to think that the new junior knew how to take care of himself.

"We're going to have tea in the study," said Tom Merry, at last. "You're welcome to join us, if you like."

"Oh, good!" said the new boy. "I shall pay my whack, of course."

"Just as you like."

"You can begin to make yourself useful by lighting the spirit-stove," said Monty Lowther. "I'll get down to the tuckshop."

"I don't mind," said the new-comer.

"What's your name?" asked Manners.

"Barber—Horace Barber."

"Nice name to plant on three inoffensive chaps!" growled Monty Lowther.

Barber laughed. It was evident that he did not easily take offence, and the chums of the Shell rather liked him for it.

Barber showed, too, that he could be useful. He lighted the stove, and had the kettle boiling by the time Monty Lowther returned from the tuckshop laden with purchases.

The Terrible Three began to feel a little more cheerful as they sat down to the tea-table. The new fellow was not so bad, after all, and they considered that they might get on with him. Of course, they could not admit him, at first, at all events, into the select circle of their society. They had no intention or wish to turn the Terrible Three into the Terrible Four. But as Barber had said himself, it was best to live amicably since they had no choice about staying together.

"What did you leave your last school for?" asked Tom Merry, as he poured out the tea. "It isn't usual for a chap to enter the Shell here from outside."

Barber nodded.

"I was in the Shell at St. Kate's," he said. "That's in the North. My people have come South to live, you see, and they prefer me near them."

"Queer taste!" murmured Monty Lowther, into his teacup.

"That wasn't the only reason, though," said Barber. "I was getting fed up with St. Kate's."

"Ahem!" said Lowther.

Barber laughed.

"Well, they were getting fed-up with me, too," he explained. "I made a discovery, and since I made it I found St. Kate's too hot to hold me. I suppose I was a little injudicious. But it was ripping fun."

The Terrible Three stared at him.

"Blessed if I catch on!" said Monty Lowther. "Do you mean to say that you are a practical joker? We bar practical jokes in this study!"

"Something in that line," said Barber. "As for barring anything in this study, I fancy that rests with me! I could become cock of the study if I liked."

"Better not take it into your head to like, then," said Tom Merry, in a tone of warning. "We hammer fellows of that sort at St. Jim's!"

"Yes, rather!" said Monty Lowther, with emphasis. "You cheery little beggar, you here! They must have been a soft lot at St. Kate's to let you become cock of a coal-locker, I should think!"

"That's because you don't understand," said Barber cheerfully. "But don't let us begin ragging. How do you get on with the fellows here?"

"All right," said Tom Merry, a little puzzled. "We have to keep the Fourth Form in their place, you know. Those chaps in Study No. 6 get on their hind legs sometimes, and we have to squash them. That's all. Of course, we're up against the New House all the time. You see, the School House is cock-house at St. Jim's, and we have to keep up its reputation. We down Figgin's & Co. from time to time, to keep them in their place."

Barber grinned.

"And they down you sometimes, I suppose?" he asked.

Tom Merry laughed good-humouredly.

"Well, yes; Figgy generally manages to keep his end up," he admitted. "But the School House is cock-house at St. Jim's. No doubt about that."

"In the School House, I suppose?" grinned Barber.

"Look here, you're a bit too

fresh, I think!" said Monty Lowther. "Don't you jaw so much, my kid! Fellows who jaw too much in this study go about with thick ears afterwards!"

"Dear me! You must suffer from thickness of ear very much!"

"Eh?"

"Deaf?" said the new boy pleasantly. "I suppose it's due to the thick ears?"

Monty Lowther rose from the table. His face was very red. The humorist of the Shell was not always able to appreciate fully the humour of others, when it was directed against himself.

"Are you looking for a flat nose?" he inquired.

"Not at all."

"Well, you'll jolly soon get one, if you're not careful!" said Monty Lowther wrathfully. "I don't want to lick you on your first night at St. Jim's, but you'll get it, and get it hot, if you try to be funny!"

"My dear chap, you couldn't lick one side of me!"

"What!" roared Monty Lowther.

"Deaf again?"

Monty Lowther came round the table. He laid his hands upon the shoulders of the new junior, and jerked him out of his chair. Tom Merry and Manners rose to their feet, too.

"Now," said Lowther grimly, "I'll jolly well show you whether I can lick you or not! Put up your hands, you young cad!"

The new boy put his hands in his pockets.

"Hold on, Monty!" said Tom Merry. "It's his first night here, you know. Go easy, and never mind his cheek."

"Well," said Lowther, with a snort, "if he'll shut up I'll let him off—"

"But I don't want to be let off!" said Barber cheerfully.

Tom Merry turned to him sharply.

"You'd better shut up!" he said.

"Rats!"

"What!" roared Tom Merry.

"Deaf, too?" said the new junior, with perfect serenity. "It seems to be an epidemic in this study. I said rats!"

Tom Merry sat down.

"Lick him!" he said. "I don't interfere any more. He wants some of the rotten cheek taken out of him, I think!"

And Monty Lowther pushed back his cuffs and advanced upon the new boy.

THE SECOND CHAPTER. The Schoolboy Hypnotist.

BARBER did not seem to want to avoid the conflict, but he looked ridiculously inadequate for it as he faced the long-limbed Lowther. Lowther was nearly a head taller, and certainly much longer in the reach, and he probably had twice as much strength as the new-comer. It looked as if the new boy would crumple up like paper in his grasp. Monty Lowther felt that himself, and he paused once more. He was angry, but he was a generous fellow at heart, and he did not like to tackle a fellow who was obviously no match for him.

"Look here!" he exclaimed. "What do you mean by checking a fellow who could knock you into little pieces with one hand? Are you dotty?"

Barber laughed.

"Not at all! I'll tackle you with pleasure—one to one! If those two chaps will step outside the study for two minutes, I'll undertake to dispose of you in that time."

"Do you think we should interfere?" exclaimed Tom Merry indignantly.

"Oh, no! But there isn't much room here. And I suppose Lowther isn't afraid to be left alone?"

Monty Lowther went crimson. "Afraid!" he hooted. "Afraid of a goggle-eyed little whipper-snapper! I'll show you whether I'm afraid or not! Get out of the study, you chaps, if he wants it by himself! I'll wipe up the blessed carpet with him!"

"Oh, all right!"

Tom Merry and Manners stepped out of the study. Barber closed the door after them, and the chums of the Shell stood in the passage, listening for the sounds of combat. But they did

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not hear any. Once Tom Merry thought he heard a muffled exclamation in Monty Lowther's voice, but that was all.

Manners had his watch in his hand, counting the minutes. A minute and a half had ticked away, and Tom Merry was beginning to feel strangely uneasy.

"Blessed if I like this, Manners!" he muttered.

Manners was looking very serious.

"I don't like it, either," he said. "There's something queer about that kid. I suppose he can't be off his rocker, can he?"

Tom Merry started. "His eyes look queer," he said.

"Yes, I noticed that."

"I've a good mind to go in—"

"Only a quarter of a minute now," said Manners. "Better stick it out."

Tom Merry hesitated.

The silence in the study was strange, unexpected, almost uncanny. Why was not Monty Lowther licking the new boy, as he had undertaken to do? Or, if he had failed in that task, he would not be licked himself without a struggle, and any kind of a struggle would make sound enough to be heard in the passage.

But the silence was complete. There was not even the mutter of a voice from within the room. What could it mean?

"Time!" said Manners at last, after what seemed an age to his companion.

He returned the watch to his pocket, and Tom Merry threw the door open.

The chums rushed in excitedly. They did not understand in the least what might have happened, but they were by no means prepared for what greeted their eyes. They stopped just inside the study, gasping with astonishment.

"My—my—my hat!"

The new boy was seated in the armchair in an attitude of careless ease. Monty Lowther was kneeling at his feet, presenting him with a cup of tea in the most humble and respectful manner.

The chums of the Shell stared at him blankly. Monty Lowther did not look round. He had his eyes fixed upon Horace Barber.

"What are you up to, you giddy ass?" roared Tom Merry.

"What's the little game, Lowther?" exclaimed Manners angrily. "What are you playing the giddy goat like that for?"

Lowther did not reply. He did not seem to hear. There was a curiously set expression upon his face and a dazed look in his eyes.

"Take the tea, my lord!" he said.

Tom Merry and Manners gasped. Was Monty Lowther gone mad? Barber waved his hand.

"Throw it away!" he said. "Pitch it into the fire, cup and all!"

Monty Lowther rose to his feet. He swung round towards the firegrate, and sent the cup of tea, cup, saucer, and all, crashing into the glowing coals.

"Lowther!" shouted Tom Merry.

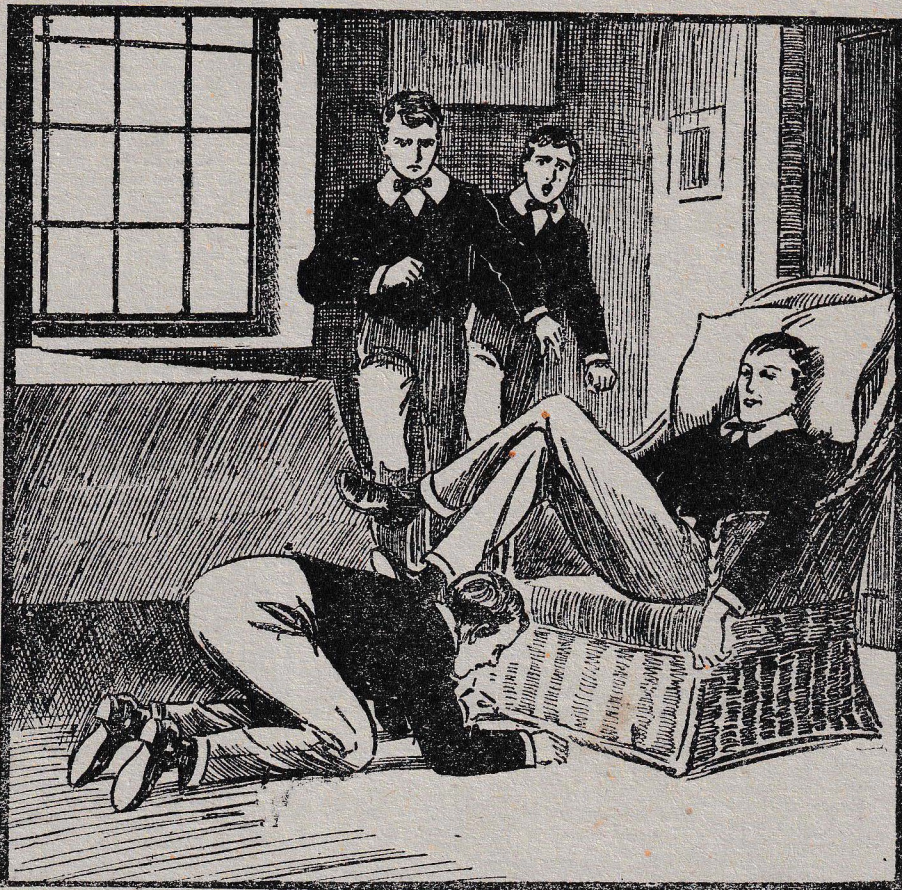
Lowther did not look at him. He turned back to Barber as if for instructions. He seemed to be quite unaware of the presence of his chums in the study. Tom Merry and Manners, their amazement now mixed with alarm, watched him speechlessly.

"What are your commands, my lord?" asked Lowther.

"Stand on your head in the corner!" said Barber.

"Yes, my lord!"

Monty Lowther walked to the corner of the study, knelt down, and stood upon his head, with his feet balanced



"Come here, Lowther, and kneel on the hearthrug so that I can rest my feet on you!" commanded the new boy. "Yes, my lord!" said Monty Lowther meekly, kneeling on the rug, and, to the amazement of his chums, taking Barber's feet on his shoulders.

against the wall, and all sorts of things dropping out of his pockets.

Tom Merry staggered back against the door.

"He's dotty!" he gasped.

"Mad as a hatter!" murmured Manners.

"Now jump on the table!" said Barber.

Lowther up-ended himself, and made a spring upon the table. The crockeryware went flying right and left, and there was crash after crash upon the floor.

"Stop it!" shrieked Tom Merry.

"Hold on, Lowther!"

Lowther stood trampling among the crockeryware that remained on the table, with his eyes still fixed upon the dark, magnetic orbs of the strange new boy.

"Now punch Manners' head!"

"Yes, my lord!"

Lowther jumped off the table, and advanced upon Manners, with his fists up. The set look upon his face showed that he was not joking. But why he should thus obey the extraordinary commands of the new boy was a mystery.

Manners backed away, so helpless with amazement that he could not possibly defend himself.

Monty Lowther followed him up, punching away, and Manners roared as Lowther's fists came biffing upon his head.

"Stop it!" he roared.

Biff, biff, biff!

Manners put up his hands to defend himself, and Barber, grinning, called Lowther off as if he were a dog.

"Stop!"

Monty Lowther stopped.

"Now go for Tom Merry!"

"Here, hold on!" exclaimed Tom Merry, dodging round the table. "Are you gone mad, or what? What does this mean?"

Lowther pursued him hotly. Barber burst into a roar of laughter, and shouted to him:

"Stop it now, Lowther!"

"Yes, my lord!"

"Come and sit on the hearthrug so that I can rest my feet on you!"

"Yes, my lord!"

Lowther squatted on the rug, and, to the amazement of his chums, took Barber's feet, and placed them upon his shoulders. Tom Merry rushed at the new boy, seized him by the collar, and shook him.

"What does this mean?" he exclaimed fiercely. "What have you done to Lowther? He seems to have gone dotty!"

"Right off his rocker!" gasped Manners. "What have you done to him, you young villain?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry shook the new boy fiercely. He was amazed, alarmed, and very angry. He could not make it out at all—it seemed uncanny, as, indeed, it was.

"What have you done?" he shouted.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Answer me!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You young rascal, I'll——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Barber.

"Collar him, Manners!"

"What ho!"

Tom Merry and Manners grasped the new boy together, and whirled him over. Barber went with a heavy bump to the floor.

"Ow!" he spluttered. "Ow! Cheese it!"

"What have you done to Lowther?"

"Hold on—I'll explain!"

"What have you done, then?"

"I've—ha, ha, ha!—I've hypnotised him!"

"Hypnotised him!"

"What?"

Tom Merry and Manners staggered back in astonishment. Barber rose to his feet, somewhat ruffled, but still grinning. He set his tie straight, and dusted his jacket. Monty Lowther was still sitting upon the hearthrug, looking fixedly before him.

"Do you mean to say that you're a hypnotist?" demanded Tom Merry, finding his voice again at last.

Barber nodded.

"Exactly," he replied.

"I—I can't believe it!"

Barber pointed at Lowther.

"Looks like it, doesn't he?" he remarked.

"Ye-es! But——"

"Speak to him, and see if he knows you."

Tom Merry bent over Lowther, and touched him on the shoulder.

"Monty, old man!" he said.

Lowther did not reply. Tom Merry shook him gently.

"Monty! Don't you know me?"

"Yes," said Lowther; "you're Dr. Holmes."

"What?" said Tom Merry, receding.

"You're Dr. Holmes," said Lowther, "and that's Mrs. Holmes." He pointed to Manners.

Tom Merry turned quite pale.

"It's horrible!" he said. "Do you mean to say that you can put anybody into that state, Barber, and make them do just as you like, and say what you choose?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Make Lowther all right again, then."

"Wouldn't you like to see him go through a few more tricks first?" asked Barber, grinning. "I can make him drink ink or eat sawdust if you like."

"No," said Tom Merry. "Make him come to himself."

"Oh, all serene!"

Barber stepped in front of Monty Lowther, fixed his magnetic eye on Lowther's fixed orbs, and made some strange passes before him with his slim, white hands. Lowther gave a start, like a fellow awakening from sleep, and cast a sudden wild glance round him. Then he jumped to his feet.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "I—I've been asleep, I think! Hallo! Who's been smashing up the happy home?"

"You have!" said Manners.

"I! What do you mean?"

"You smashed the crockery jumping on the table," said Tom Merry.

Lowther turned red.

"Oh, don't be an ass!" he said. "What are you telling that yarn for? I suppose I couldn't jump on the table without knowing it, could I?"

"That's just what you did do," said Tom Merry. "The new chap's hypnotised you. Barber's a hypnotist!"

"Rats!"

"It's true, Lowther," said Tom Merry gravely. "Can you remember what happened when we went out of the study?"

Lowther started, and wrinkled his brows in an effort of thought.

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 202.

"I—I was going to lick Barber," he said. "I—I seem to forget what happened. I—I don't remember anything after you went out of the study!"

Tom Merry looked at Barber. The new boy was grinning hugely. He was evidently enjoying his little joke on the Terrible Three. But the matter did not appear wholly humorous to Tom Merry.

"Is this what you were referring to when you said that your old school was too hot to hold you?" he asked.

"Yes," grinned Barber. "I studied the subject a long time, you know, and I found that I had the gift. I can hypnotise anybody. I was always a bit of a joker, and I made things hum at St. Kate's until they found out I was a hypnotist. It would have been all right then, only I made the mistake of hypnotising my Form-master. I made him do a cakewalk in the Form-room. They couldn't prove it, you know; but the Head was very suspicious, and in the end he asked my father to take me away."

"I should think your father gave you a jolly good hiding!" said Manners grimly.

Barber chuckled.

"He would have," he said; "only I told him that if he did I would hypnotise him, and make him go up to the City one day dressed as a pierrot. Then he decided to let me off!"

"You young rascal!" said Tom Merry; but he could not help laughing.

"My hat!" said Lowther. "I'll give you the biggest licking you ever had in your life for your cheek in mesmerising me, you young cub!"

Barber held up his hand.

"Pax!" he exclaimed. "I've let you into this secret, but I expect you to keep it. I don't want to row with you chaps. I was only showing you what I could do. Besides, if you row with me I can hypnotise you, and make you duck yourselves in the river, or go down to class with curling-pins in your hair. Better go slow!"

"My word!" said Manners.

"You've told me that you're up against the Fourth Form here, and against the New House," said Barber. "I'm in your study, and I side with you. Think of the larks we can have if you keep it dark!"

"Well, we might," said Tom Merry.

But as he made that remark, Tom Merry little realised that ere long he would be used as a subject for a lark. He little expected to be placed under the fluence himself, and to be compelled to do things of an extraordinary nature.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Madness of Tom Merry.

THE next morning Tom Merry was thinking of the schoolboy hypnotist as he came down to breakfast. Barber was in a good temper, certainly, for he was all smiles. But his good humour might mean that he was planning some surprises for Tom Merry & Co., and the Terrible Three did not like it. They had discovered already that the new junior had a peculiar sense of humour, and they did not like the idea of its being directed against themselves. There was, truly, something almost impish in the peculiar nature of the schoolboy hypnotist.

"He's jolly rum altogether!" Tom Merry remarked. "I suppose a normal chap wouldn't have a queer gift like that at all. I must say I wish Railton had put him into some other study!"

"What ho!" said Manners and Lowther feelingly.

At the Shell breakfast-table, in the dining-room in the School House, Barber sat opposite to Tom Merry. It did not occur to Tom Merry that Barber would begin so soon, and he fell an easy victim.

Mr. Linton was at the head of the table, and he was not looking good-tempered. Mr. Linton was sometimes crabby in the mornings. When he looked cross, the Shell fellows were very careful. But Tom Merry, instead of being careful, appeared to be unusually reckless that morning.

"Will you pass me the salt, sir?" he asked.

Mr. Linton looked at him. It was not usual for the boys to ask their Form-master to pass them things. However, Mr. Linton passed the salt.

"Will you pass the bread-and-butter, sir?"

"Pass Merry the bread-and-butter, Manners!" said Mr. Linton, with a frown.

"Will you pass me a knife, sir?"

"Merry!"

"Will you pass me a fork, sir?"

"Merry!"

"Will you pass me——"

"Merry!" thundered Mr. Linton.

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry, smiling. "Will you pass me the pepper, sir?"

The pepper was nowhere near Mr. Linton's end of the table. The master of the Shell gazed at Tom Merry speechlessly for some seconds. He could only suppose that Tom Merry had the extraordinary audacity to venture to rag him before the Form and the rest of the school in the dining-room.

"Merry!" he jerked out at last.

"Yes, sir."

"Is this intended for impertinence, Merry?"

"Oh, no, sir! Will you please pass me the jam?"

"Boy!"

"Will you pass me——"

"Stand up, Merry!"

Tom Merry stood up.

"I cannot understand this insolence!" said Mr. Linton, his voice quivering with anger. "You are usually a well-behaved boy, Merry!"

"Yes, sir. Will you pass me a handkerchief?"

"What!"

There was a suppressed giggle at the table. Manners and Lowther looked at their chum in amazement, and Lowther pinched his arm.

"Shut up, you ass!" he muttered. "Are you dotty?"

"Will you pass me the pickles, sir?"

"Leave the table at once, Merry!" almost shouted the Form-master. "You—you insolent boy! Leave the break-fast-table at once!"

"Certainly, sir!"

Tom Merry stepped away from the table. He picked up his plate, and placed his cup and saucer upon it, and arranged another plate on top of the cup, and placed the salt-cellar on top of the plate. Mr. Linton stared at him.

"Merry!" he ejaculated.

Crash!

Mr. Linton's voice startled the junior, and the crockery in his hands fell to the floor with a terrific smash.

"My hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"Are you insane, boy?"

"Oh, no, sir!"

"How dare you play such absurd tricks?"

"My dear fellow——"

"What!"

"You see, old boy——"

Mr. Linton rose to his feet. His face was red with anger.

"Leave the dining-room at once, Merry!"

"Yes, sir."

Tom Merry proceeded towards the door. He lifted his right foot off the floor, and hopped, instead of walking. There was a buzz of amazement from the whole room. Kildare jumped up from the Sixth Form table, and ran towards the Shell fellow, and grasped him by the collar and stopped his peculiar performance.

"You young ass!" he growled. "How dare you!"

"Ow! Leggo!"

"Come out, you silly young fool!"

Kildare jerked the Shell fellow out into the passage.

"Now, what do you mean by it?" he demanded.

"Mean by what?" gasped Tom Merry.

"These silly tricks."

"What silly tricks?"

"I suppose you know what you're doing, unless you've gone suddenly dotty?" Kildare exclaimed angrily.

"Oh, get your hair cut!"

"What!" yelled Kildare.

"Go and eat coke!"

Kildare gasped. He had certainly never been spoken to like that by a junior before. He clenched his hands hard, and then paused. There was a dazed look in Tom Merry's face. He dropped his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Are you well, Merry?" he asked.

"Right as a trivet, cocky!"

"Do you know what you are doing?"

"I suppose so. Where did you get that face?"

"Go to your study and stay there!" said Kildare.

"Right-ho, old cock!"

Tom Merry went upstairs. Kildare returned to the dining-room, looking very puzzled. A thunderstorm seemed to be brooding over the Shell table during the remainder of breakfast. The fellows did not envy Tom Merry. A severe caning was the least he could expect for his extraordinary conduct in the dining-room.

What had he done it for?

There was only one explanation to the juniors who knew of the peculiar powers of the schoolboy hypnotist. Manners and Lowther cast furious glances at Barber. He grinned serenely. They could not betray him. It would have been sneaking.

After breakfast Kildare joined Mr. Linton as the latter

left the dining-room. The Shell master's brow was like a thundercloud.

"I think Merry is not well, sir," said Kildare. "You don't mind my saying so? It seems to me that he has had a fit, or something."

Mr. Linton started.

"Do you think so, Kildare? It was, indeed, most extraordinary. Is he subject to attacks of any sort, do you know?"

"No; I never knew he was, sir," confessed Kildare. "But—but all the same, I'm sure that Merry was not responsible for what he did just now."

"I will question him," said Mr. Linton.

"He's in his study, sir."

"Very good!"

Mr. Linton ascended to the Shell passage, and looked into Tom Merry's study. Tom Merry was there. He was standing by the window, looking out, and he turned round as Mr. Linton came in, and stared at him strangely.

"Merry!" said Mr. Linton.

"Hallo, Wally!"

Mr. Linton staggered back.

"Merry, do you know who I am?" he gasped.

"Yes; you're D'Arcy minor."

"The boy is mad!" exclaimed Mr. Linton aghast. "Merry, remain here. I will telephone at once for the doctor from Rylcombe. This must be seen to. Remain here!"

"Yes, sir."

And Mr. Linton hurried downstairs.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

A Surprise for the Shell.

THE Shell were in a buzz of excitement when they took their places in the Form-room that morning.

Tom Merry was mad!

That was the extraordinary story that ran through the Form. Those who had seen his strange conduct in the dining-room could hardly doubt it; and the New House fellows, when they heard about it, hardly doubted it, either.

That he was confined to his study, and that the medical man had been sent for from Rylcombe, was known to the whole school.

The fellows were excited naturally. They had never suspected Tom Merry of incipient lunacy. But there seemed to be no doubt about it now. In the Shell Form only two fellows knew better—Lowther and Manners. And they could not explain. Barber, of course, knew as well. Barber was grinning to himself with a sort of gnomish glee. He was evidently well pleased with himself. Monty Lowther and Manners, mentally, were promising him all sorts of things when lessons were over. But before lessons were over their own turn had come.

Mr. Linton was very grave. Tom Merry was one of his best pupils, and although he had been angry at first, all his anger, of course, had vanished, now, and he was only sorry. He was not in a humour, however, for any ragging in the class-room, and when Monty Lowther and Manners started it together, the fellows looked at them in astonishment. The chums of the Shell could not have chosen a worse moment.

"Manners!" said Mr. Linton, indicating that Manners was to construe.

Manners rose to his feet.

But instead of construing Virgil, he placed the book on the end of his nose, bending his head back, and commenced balancing it.

Mr. Linton gazed at him dumbfounded.

"Manners!" he thundered.

"Ow!" roared Gore, as the book slid from Manners' nose and fell upon the back of Gore's head. "Oh, you silly ass!"

"Silence, Gore——"

"Ow! I've got a biff on the napper, sir!"

"Silence! Manners, how dare you!"

"Sorry, sir!" said Manners. "I'll try with the inkpot!"

"What!"

Manners jerked the inkpot from its slot in the desk, and tried to balance it upon his nose. The effect was disastrous. As the inkpot rolled over, Manners' collar and tie were drenched with ink, and several splashes were bestowed upon the fellows round him. Gore jumped up and left his place in alarm and Skimpole gave a yell.

"Manners!" gasped Mr. Linton.

"Yes, sir?"

"What are you doing? What——"

Mr. Linton paused. He remembered Tom Merry, and turned quite pale. Was Manners a sharer of the mysterious madness of his chum?

"Manners!" he said faintly.

"He's mad!" roared Gore, rubbing the ink from his face with his handkerchief, and quickly reducing his handkerchief to an inky rag. "He's as mad as a hatter! He's as mad as Tom Merry! Ow! I'm inky all over! He ought to be shut up in an asylum! Ow!"

"Bless me!" said Skimpole. "I am very inky! I—"

"Manners, come here!" said Mr. Linton, very gently.

"Yes, sir."

Manners came out before the class, hopping on one leg. He held the other straight out before him, and the effect was comical enough. Mr. Linton dodged away just in time to escape being prodded upon the watchchain by Manners' extended boot.

"My hat!" gasped Kangaroo. "What a game! Is it a jape?"

"He's dotty!" said Glyn.

"He's as dotty as Tom Merry!"

"Great Scott! Look at him!" yelled Kangaroo.

Manners was following up the Form-master, hopping upon his left leg, with his right prodding at the amazed and dismayed Form-master.

Mr. Linton, gasping with astonishment and dismay, retreated round his desk, and Manners followed him fast.

"Boy," gasped Mr. Linton, "go back to your place! Sit down at once!"

"Rats!" said Manners.

"What!"

"Stand where you are, and I'll puncture you!" said Manners, hopping round the desk after Mr. Linton.

"Good heavens!" gasped the master of the Shell faintly, as he dodged Manners' boot. "This is—is terrible! The boy is certainly mad!"

"Look here, you're not playing fair!" said Manners, as Mr. Linton circled the desk again. "Come out into the open!"

"Boy!"

"I'll have you in a minute!"

"Help!"

Biff, biff!

The hopping junior tapped the Form-master's chest with his boot at last. Mr. Linton staggered back towards the boys' desks.

"Seize him!" he exclaimed feebly. "Boys, he has taken leave of his senses! Secura him!"

"Certainly, sir!" said Kangaroo.

The Cornstalk junior ran towards Manners, and several more fellows lent a hand. The unfortunate junior was secured.

He did not resist. He stood smiling at Mr. Linton, and seemed to be wondering why the Form-master did not continue to play the game.

"Take him to the Shell dormitory!" gasped Mr. Linton. "Dr. Short is there, and he will see to him as well as to Merry."

"Yes, sir," said Kangaroo. "Come on, Manners, old man! We're not going to hurt you, sonny, but you must come!"

"Good-bye, Bluebell!" said Manners to Mr. Linton.

"Good heavens!"

Manners was removed from the Form-room. Mr. Linton sat down and mopped his brow with his handkerchief. He was in a perspiration.

It was some minutes before the juniors returned, having disposed of Manners in the Shell dormitory, where Tom Merry was already in the hands of the medical man from Rylcombe.

They took their places, and an attempt was made to resume lessons. Unfortunately, it was Monty Lowther who was first called upon to construe.

Lowther rose, and instead of construing Latin, began to sing in a high-pitched voice:

"Won't you come home, Bill Bailey?"

Mr. Linton jumped.

"Lowther," he shouted, "you are taking advantage of the unfortunate state of your school-fellows to pretend to be afflicted in the same way."

"Won't you come home, Bill Bailey?" chanted Lowther.

"Silence!"

"Won't you come home?"

"Lowther!"

"She moans the whole day long," resumed Lowther. "I'll do the cooking, darling, I'll pay the rent. I know I've done you wrong—"

"Lowther!"

"Remember the Sunday evening I turned you out," sang Lowther cheerfully, "with nothing but a brush and comb—"

"Good heavens!"

"Ain't it a shame! I know I'm to blame—"

"Montague Lowther!"

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 292.

"Bill Bailey, won't you please come home?" chanted Lowther.

"He's mad!" yelled Gore.

"Mad as a hatter!"

"Mad as the other two!"

"It is—is extraordinary!" gasped Mr. Linton, sinking into his chair. "Noble, take Lowther to the Shell dormitory."

"Yes, sir," said Kangaroo.

"I cannot understand this! It is like an epidemic! But Lowther certainly is not in his right senses! Take him away at once! The class will be dismissed for the morning," said Mr. Linton. "I—I do not feel equal to it any longer. You may leave the Form-room. Dismiss!"

The Shell crowded out.

They were glad enough to be excused the remainder of morning lessons; but they were amazed, and most of them were very much concerned for the Terrible Three.

Lowther was taken up to the Shell dormitory. Manners and Tom Merry had been put to bed, and they had gone quietly enough. Dr. Holmes, the Head of St. Jim's, was in the dormitory with Dr. Short, the little medical man from Rylcombe.

"What! Another of them!" gasped Dr. Short, as Lowther was brought in.

"Yes, sir. Quite dotty!" said Kangaroo.

"This is amazing!"

"Can you account for it in any way, doctor?" asked the Head, who was looking very pale and disturbed.

"I cannot, sir—absolutely!" said the medical man. "It is the most extraordinary case I have ever heard of—absolutely! The boys must be taken every care of, and they had better not attend lessons again yet; but—but it is remarkable, sir, that they seem to be absolutely normal in every respect, excepting—"

"Excepting that they have suddenly become insane?"

"Absolutely!" gasped the doctor.

"It is amazing!" said the Head. "I cannot understand it in the least! Three more healthy and normal boys I have never seen!"

"It is absolutely astounding!"

"It is a puzzle!" said the Head.

"Absolutely!" said Dr. Short, apparently finding some comfort in that absurd remark. "I admit that I am very much surprised. But we shall see."

"The giddy medico can't understand it any more than we can," Kangaroo remarked, as the Shell fellows went down. "He's quite in the dark—"

"Absolutely, as he would say himself," grinned Barber.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Kangaroo turned to the new boy suddenly.

"Look here, I suppose you've not had anything to do with this?" he exclaimed.

Barber backed away a little.

"I!" he ejaculated. "How? Why?"

"Well, I don't know," said the Cornstalk junior. "But it's queer that the three of them should go barmy all at once, just after you've arrived here, and been put into their study. I don't know whether lunacy is catching."

"Oh, rot!" said Barber.

He walked away rather hastily. It was beginning to dawn upon the new junior that perhaps he had gone a little too far. In the quadrangle, the Shell fellows gathered in groups, discussing the matter. They could not understand it in the least. They were as puzzled as the medical man, and though they talked of nothing else, they did not come anywhere near finding a solution of the mystery.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

The Schoolboy Hypnotist on the Warpath.

"BAI JOVE!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy uttered the ejaculation. The Fourth Form had been dismissed at last, and they found the Shell already out. And Kangaroo, and Glyn, and Thompson, and a crowd more Shell fellows hurried up to them to tell them the amazing story. The Fourth were amazed to hear it.

"Bai Jove!" repeated Arthur Augustus.

"Well," said Blake, "can't you say any other words?"

"Weally, Blake, but I'm sure I'm wight, you know!"

Blake looked dumbfounded.

"Right about what?" he asked.

"Wight about this swange affair, deah boy," explained D'Arcy. "You know, Tom Mewwy and the others have nevah acted like this befoah. It's only since that new boy has been heah. I weally think he must have something to do with the whole mattah!"

"H'm!" grunted Blake. "But what the dickens can the new kid have done to them?"

"I don't exactly know, deah boy. But supposing we go and question Barber."

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"Well, it's not a bad idea," said Blake.

"Come on, then!"

And the four chums separated, to seek Barber. It was pretty clear that the schoolboy hypnotist was purposely keeping out of sight.

It was Blake who found him, but not as he expected. Blake looked into the gymnasium, and discovered Barber sitting there with a book in his hand. Barber regarded him steadily over the book as he approached, and his dark, magnetic eyes were fixed upon Blake's. Blake felt a queer feeling coming over him, and he guessed what it meant. Barber dropped the book, and made the hypnotic passes with his hands.

Blake's pace slackened, and he walked up to Barber peacefully. The influence was on.

"Go out of the gym," said Barber calmly. "Go and sit on the window-sill of the Head's study, and don't move on any account."

"Yes," said Blake submissively.

"If anybody speaks to you, say 'Get your hair cut!' and nothing else."

"Yes," muttered Blake.

He quitted the gym. In the quadrangle his chums sighted him.

"Found him, deah boy?" called out D'Arcy.

Blake did not reply. He walked back to the School House, and with some difficulty climbed upon the window-sill of the Head's study, which was high from the ground.

There was a surprised exclamation within the study. Dr. Holmes and Mr. Railton were there, with Mr. Linton, the three masters in deep and anxious consultation on the mysterious state of the Terrible Three. At the sight of a sturdy junior's broad back at the window they stared in surprise, as well they might.

"What impertinence!" exclaimed the Head. "The whole school seems to be in an extraordinary state this morning. That is Blake of the Fourth, I think."

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Railton. He stepped to the window, and tapped on the glass. "Go away at once, Blake!" he called out.

The Fourth-Former did not move.

Mr. Railton raised the sash, and tapped Blake on the shoulder.

"Blake, go away at once! How dare you!"

"Get your hair cut!"

Mr. Railton almost staggered.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "I never heard of such extraordinary insolence. Blake, go to my study at once. I shall cane you severely."

"Get your hair cut!"

"Will you obey me, boy?"

"Get your hair cut!"

A crowd of fellows were gathering round the window now, gazing at Blake in astonishment. In the study the three masters were silent and alarmed.

"Come down, you ass!" said Figgins. "You'll get a licking. What are you sticking on the window-sill for, you chump?"

"Get your hair cut!"

"He's dotty!" said Fatty Wynn. "The School House is a blessed lunatic asylum. They ought to raise a subscription to buy one another strait-jackets."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus came racing up. The swell of St. Jim's was looking very excited.

"Blake, deah boy, come down!" he exclaimed.

"Get your hair cut!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Get your hair cut!"

"Take him away," said Mr. Railton. "Take him away to the Fourth-Form dormitory. Dr. Short must see him. This is most extraordinary."

But Blake resisted when the juniors, in obedience to Mr. Railton, dragged him from the window-sill. They were too many for him, however, and he was taken away, still struggling. Mr. Railton closed the window, and turned back towards the Head and Mr. Linton with a face quite pale.

"It is—is amazing!" said the Head. "It is as if there were madness in the air. Blake is usually a most sensible boy."

"Quite so," said Mr. Railton. "There is some extraordinary influence at work. I suspected at first what the boys called a rag, but it is quite clear that these unfortunate lads are not responsible for their actions."

"Quite clear!" said the master of the Shell, with a nod.

"But—but they cannot all be mad!" the Head exclaimed, in bewilderment. "Four boys could not all go mad in one morning, without any cause whatever."

Mr. Railton shook his head.

"It is evidently not insanity," he said. "If it were pos-

sible, I should suppose that they were the victims of hypnotism."

"Hypnotism!" ejaculated the Head and Mr. Linton together.

"Yes. I have seen subjects in hypnotic trances act in a manner equally extraordinary," said Mr. Railton. "But it is absurd to suppose that there is a hypnotist at this school who would play such a daring and inconsiderate trick upon the boys."

"It would be very extraordinary," said the Head.

"Dear me!" said Mr. Linton. "Look at this!"

He pointed to the window. Outside, in the quadrangle, Herries and Digby could be seen. They were clasping one another, and waltzing in the quad, surrounded by a staring crowd of juniors.

"Herries and Digby, too!" gasped the Head.

"I—I feel as if I were dreaming!" murmured Mr. Linton.

Mr. Railton compressed his lips.

"It is absurd to suppose that insanity can have attacked so many boys in one morning," he said quietly, "and the only other explanation is—"

"Hypnotism!"

"Yes. And it only remains to find the hypnotist!" said Mr. Railton.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

The Last of the 'Fluence.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS was looking thoughtful. D'Arcy did quite a lot of thinking. If it wasn't about fancy waistcoats, it was usually about silk hats. But on this occasion it was about something quite different.

D'Arcy was pondering over the strange actions of Blake and the Terrible Three. The swell of St. Jim's still stuck to his first theory that Barber, the new boy, knew something about the whole matter.

Blake had gone in search of the new fellow. Had the latter exerted some peculiar influence over him, and thus compelled him to act in such an extraordinary way?

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed the swell of St. Jim's to himself. "I believe I've got it! The fellow's a beastly hypnotist, and he's been using his wotten 'fluence on Blake and the others! Gweat Scott! I'll go along and see him, and get the whole twuth out of him!"

He found Barber in the gym. The new junior was alone, and he was grinning. He grinned still more as D'Arcy came in.

"You boundah!" exclaimed D'Arcy. "What have you done to Blake and the othah fellahs?"

"What have I done to them?" queried the new boy.

"Yes. What have you done to them? Look heah, Barbah, I know what you are! You're a wotten hypnotist, and you have been putting the 'fluence on the chaps!"

The new boy laughed heartily.

"Well, what if I have?" he asked.

"Gweat Scott! I wogard it as a wotten twick, and I ordah you to release Tom Mewwy and the othahs from your beastly hypnotism!" said D'Arcy angrily.

At that moment Figgins & Co. happened to pass the door of the gym, and they caught the word hypnotism. In a flash it all dawned on them.

"Hypnotism!" murmured Figgins.

"The new chap!" muttered Kerr.

"Who'd have thought it!" said Fatty Wynn, with a low whistle of amazement. "It—it can't be true!"

"Hush! Listen!"

"I ordah you to release them," said Arthur Augustus, with some heat. "Othahwise, I shall give you a feahful thwashin'. Do you undahstand? Don't make your wotten passes at me. You cannot hypnotise me now I am on my guard. I have too stwong a personality for that."

"Good old Gussy!" murmured Figgins.

"I wepeat, Barbah—"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's voice died away.

Figgins & Co. looked into the gym. Barber had his back to them, and did not see them. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was facing them, but the expression of the swell of St. Jim's was fixed. In spite of his strong personality—which perhaps was not quite so strong as he supposed—he had fallen under the hypnotic influence quite easily.

Barber was making slow passes before his face. The lids of D'Arcy's eyes drooped, and he closed them. Barber chuckled softly.

"Open your eyes, D'Arcy!" he said.

D'Arcy opened his eyes.

"Go!" said Barber. "You're to go into the Head's study, and do a cakewalk there. Do you understand?"

"Yaas."

"Go at once!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy walked to the doorway of the gym. Barber looked after him, grinning, but his grin died away as he saw Figgins & Co. The three New House juniors had their eyes upon him, and he knew that they must have been watching him, and that his secret was discovered.

"I say, keep it dark, you fellows!" Barber exclaimed eagerly.

Figgins frowned.

"So you're a giddy hypnotist!" he said.

"Looks like it. doesn't it?"

"I'm not going to keep it dark," said Kerr scornfully. "I would never have believed it possible, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. It's jolly clever of you, but it's a rotten trick to play on anybody."

"Oh, rats! You'll keep it dark, or——"

"Or what?" exclaimed Figgins, clenching his big fists.

"Or I'll put the 'fluence on you three chaps, and make you punch one another black and blue," said Barber coolly.

"You can't put it on three at once, I suppose," said Kerr, with a grin. "Collar him, you chaps, and we'll make him own up before all the fellows. We're not going to have the whole school supposing that Tom Merry & Co. are mad, just to please that rotten jokist."

"No fear!" said Figgins.

And Figgins & Co. rushed upon the schoolboy hypnotist.

Barber had no chance.

He could not, as the keen Scottish junior had remarked, hypnotise three fellows at once; Figgins & Co. gave him no time to hypnotise even one. They collared him, and whirled him off his feet, and dragged him out of the gym.

"Hallo! What's the row here?" demanded Kangaroo, as a crowd of juniors were attracted by the sight of the School House boy struggling with the chums of the New House.

"Hands off the School House, you boudners!"

"Pax!" said Figgins. "We've found him out. He's a giddy hypnotist!"

"What?"

"He's hypnotised Tom Merry and the other chaps," Kerr explained.

"Phew!"

"Gussy's just gone in!" exclaimed Kerr.

"After him!"

Figgins & Co. rushed after the swell of St. Jim's, anxious to stop him before he could get to the Head's study. They left Barber surrounded by an excited and threatening crowd of fellows. D'Arcy was already in the School House, and as the New House juniors ran in and after him into the lower passage, they saw him disappear into the doorway of the Head's study.

"Too late!" gasped Figgins.

It was indeed too late to stop the swell of St. Jim's from obeying the command of the schoolboy hypnotist. He had entered the Head's study without knocking, and the three masters there looked at him sharply. It was the first time anybody had ever known the elegant Fourth-Former to be guilty of such an indiscretion.

"D'Arcy!" said the Head sternly.

"Yaas, sir."

"What do you want here?"

"I am goin' to do a cakewalk, sir."

"What?"

Arthur Augustus did not answer again. He began to cakewalk. Mr. Railton, Mr. Linton, and the Head stared at him blankly. It was another case of the same mysterious malady—they knew that at once.

Mr. Railton strode towards him suddenly, and grasped him by the shoulder, and forcibly stopped the performance.

"D'Arcy," he said quietly, "listen to me."

"You are intewwuptin' the performance, deah boy!"

"Who told you to do that?" asked Mr. Railton, fixing his eyes upon D'Arcy with a steady gaze.

D'Arcy was silent.

"You were told to do that, D'Arcy."

"Yaas, sir."

"Who told you?"

Silence.

"You see, sir," said Mr. Railton, turning to the Head,

"the boy is evidently under the influence of another, but cannot speak his name. Doubtless he is being influenced to keep silent on that point. It is obviously a case of hypnotism."

There was a roar from the quadrangle. The masters turned hastily to the window. Out in the quad an excited crowd of juniors were gathered. Figgins & Co., too late to stop D'Arcy, had returned to take summary vengeance upon the hypnotist. Barber was wriggling in the grasp of a dozen juniors. The shouts of the boys were wafted in at the open window of the Head's study.

"Boys!"

The hubbub ceased at once. The fellows, startled by the Head's voice, turned towards the window. Barber, with his clothes rent, his jacket split, and his collar hanging by a single stud, staggered from amid the press of juniors. Kildare had just arrived upon the spot, and the Head made a sign to him.

"Kildare, bring that junior here—the new boy, Barber."

"Yes, sir."

One minute later the dishevelled new boy, gasping for breath, and with Kildare's grip on his collar, was marched into the Head's study.

"Barber," said Dr. Holmes sternly, "you are discovered! You have the power of hypnotism, it appears?"

Barber was silent.

"If you do not answer me at once frankly I will flog you and expel you from the school!" said the Head grimly.

"Ye-es, sir. I—I am a hypnotist," faltered Barber.

"Very good! You have hypnotised the boys who have behaved in an extraordinary manner this morning?"

"Ye-es, sir."

"You are, I suppose, able to release them from the state you have thrown them into?"

Barber grinned a little.

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"Do so with D'Arcy."

"Very well, sir."

Barber made a few passes before the dazed face of the swell of St. Jim's. The masters and Kildare watched him with breathless interest. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave a kind of start, and stared round him wildly.

"Bai Jove!" he exclaimed. "How did I get here? What——"

"He's all right now, sir."

"Bai Jove! You uttah wottah, you have been puttin' the 'fluence on, aftah all——"

"You will do the same thing for the other boys, Barber," said the Head, in his deep voice, "and then you will pack your box and leave this school by the next train. You may go!"

And Barber went.

When the boys of St. Jim's gathered in the Form-rooms for afternoon lessons one place in the Shell-room was empty. Horace Barber had gone.

He had already left St. Jim's, and he did not return. Tom Merry & Co., free from the mysterious "fluence" now, took their usual places in the Form. They were not sorry that Barber had gone.

"He was too jolly dangerous a chap to have about," Monty Lowther remarked, when the juniors came out after school. "I'm glad he's gone."

"He would have picked up an awful crop of licks from the fellows he hypnotised if he had stayed," grinned Manners.

"Yes, rather!"

"And we've got the study to ourselves again now," said Tom Merry.

"By Jove, yes! I forgot that! Hurrah!"

And to celebrate the recovery of their own special den the Terrible Three stood a magnificent banquet in the study to all the whilom victims of the Schoolboy Hypnotist.

THE END.

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THE FIRST CHAPTER.

At the Fort—Nina Intervenes—The Mysterious Horseman.

THE Arabian sun was blazing down with a power that rendered the still air so hot that it seemed as though a few more degrees of heat would mean death. A deep silence reigned, for even the fierce beasts of prey had slunk to their lairs, where they lay panting through the fiery heat.

On the hill-slope, beneath the shade of the palm-trees, lay the three comrades, Jack, Sam, and Pete. Beside them lay Rory, breathing at a tremendous pace, and with his tongue lolling out. A small stream trickled from the rocks, dropping into a tiny and beautifully clear pool.

The comrades had found that spring when it seemed to them that they could endure their thirst no longer.

Pete was the only one who was smoking. Neither heat nor cold, hunger nor thirst, ever stopped his smoking.

"Do you tink it is going to get much hotter, Jack?" growled Pete, slightly shifting his position, and sighing.

"You wanted a hot country, and you've got it."

"I was noticing dat fact," observed Pete. "I did not ask you for a country where you might roast potatoes on de soil. You feel how hot dat rifle-barrel is, Sammy."

"Hellup! Here, get it off my hand, you silly coon!"

"Yah, yah, yah! Tought you would find it warm. It is almost hot enough to explode de bullet, and make de gunpowder red-hot."

"I reckon ordinary leaden bullets don't explode with the heat," said Sam; "and gunpowder does not get red-hot, as a rule."

"I'm talking ob de exceptions to de rule."

"How can there be any exceptions?"

"I ain't got time to explain de matter to you, Sammy. It is too mighty hot to convince such an obstinate man as you are, and— Look at dat, now! A horseman coming across de plain—coming dis way, too. Looks like a soldier."

The rider was quite young, and as he approached the spot



With the quickness of a well-skilled boxer, Pete ducked his head. It was well for him he did so, for a broad-bladed knife flashed into the room and stuck into the opposite wall.

where the comrades lay they noticed that he was a handsome young fellow, with fair, wavy hair, and dreamy grey eyes, in which was a sad expression.

Now he dismounted, and, leaving his Arab steed unguarded, ascended the height on foot.

He was above the medium height, and slimly built, although there was plenty of breadth across his shoulders, while his chest was deep.

He stopped suddenly as he caught sight of the three comrades, and appeared to be in doubt about approaching.

"We are friends!" exclaimed Jack, seeing the young fellow's hesitation. "At least, it is certain that we are not foes."

The stranger glanced at Rory, then he approached.

"De dog won't bite you," said Pete.

"I am glad of that!" exclaimed the stranger, smiling rather sadly. "I came to this spot to quench my thirst. My horse also wants a drink. You see, he is following me. My name is Fred Meredith."

"You are a lieutenant, are you not?"

inquired Jack, when he had given their names.

"Yes. I am stationed at a fort not very far from here."

"Do you happen to know a Colonel Duncan? He is in command of a fort somewhere on Jed Aared."

"These hills are Jed Aared. Colonel Duncan is my commander," answered Meredith; and as he spoke the colour mounted to his cheeks, while a startled expression came into his eyes.

"We have letters of introduction to the colonel," said Jack; "in fact, we volunteered to bring some despatches to him."

"I can take them for you if you wish," said Meredith. "It will save you a long journey."

"Well, we want to see the country," said Jack, "therefore we do not mind the journey. Besides, I pledged my word to deliver the despatches into the colonel's hands. Of course, I do not insinuate that they would not be equally secure in your hands, but I must necessarily keep my promise."

"Yes. I suppose so," answered Meredith. "I will conduct you to the fort. Are you ready to start now?"

"Golly! What am you tinkin' about, Freddy?" exclaimed Pete. "Surely you don't expect us to go froug' dis burning heat?"

"I must tell you that there is trouble with the Bedouins. Zuree, the Phantom Chief, has been seen in the neighbourhood. One of our men was found lifeless on the plain. There is grave peril in travelling by night, especially when on foot."

"Can't help dat," said Pete. "De sun has got to go down before dis child gets up. De temperature might be all right for a salamander, or one ob dose quadrupeds dat rader like red-hot fire, but it don't suit de constitution ob an ordinary nigger."

As the sun went down the comrades continued their journey. In about half an hour they came in sight of the fort. The sentry grinned as he gave the lieutenant the semblance of a salute. Meredith led the comrades into the mess-room, where another young lieutenant was chatting and smoking with some subs.

He was a magnificently-built young man, with a dark, handsome face, and brilliant eyes.

"Well, Meredith," he exclaimed, "you have got back safely. I see! Glad that! Life is much like a game at pool. You should always play for safety. Brought some friends?"

"Yes. We met quite by chance at the spring, and, strange to say, they bring despatches for the colonel. This gentleman is Lieutenant Harold Vance. Mr Jack Owen, Mr. Sam Grant, and Pete. Our other friend is Rory. I know you like dogs, Vance?"

At a sign from his master, Rory got up on his hind-legs and moved his jaws. Pete, by means of his ventriloquism, supplied the voice, and it sounded exactly as though it came from Rory's moving jaws.

"Shows your good taste, Lieutenant Vance! I'm pleased to make your acquaintance! Shake hands, old chap!"

"Well, I'm shot!" gasped Vance, as Rory offered his right paw and made a bow. "That is really wonderful! Ha, ha, ha! One of you chaps is remarkably clever! I don't know which one it is, but—"

"Oh, it's Pete," laughed Jack.

"Well, I'm glad to meet you all, and that's the truth! You ought to bring a little life into this deadly dull hole! Of course, we have Meredith, and he is splendid company, while he is a very gallant officer. I have not the slightest doubt that Wellington was a very brave man. Now, I don't profess to be brave. Of course, slashing about amongst a few Bedouins and other scoundrels does not constitute bravery. It is the man who will face certain death without flinching who is the brave one. Meredith is such, and if he were not so beastly bashful he would tell you so."

"Come, Vance," murmured Meredith, "I have never asserted such a thing!"

"Because you are too bashful, dear boy. But we, who know your character so well, can judge for ourselves. Now, Owen, if you will give me the despatches, I will take them to the colonel—unless, of course, Meredith prefers to do so."

"By no means!" said Meredith.

"Well, you see, Vance," exclaimed Jack, "I pledged my word to deliver the despatches into the colonel's own hands, and—"

"It is exactly the same thing, my dear fellow," interposed Vance. "The colonel is a relative of mine by marriage, and you need not have the slightest fear that I shall steal the valuable documents, which probably contain a promotion for Meredith. We are equals now, but I'll bet they make him my captain! Well, I will say he deserves it."

"Of course, it practically comes to the same thing," answered Jack. "All the same, when a man gives a promise to another—who, by a strange chance, happened to be a college chum of mine—why, that man must adhere to such promise to the letter."

"Yes," exclaimed Vance, knitting his brows, "I think you are right. I myself am a stickler for duty. Meredith is exactly the same. If Duncan were to order him to say, 'Kill some gunners, and capture the gun,' he would walk straight up to its muzzle, not caring twopence whether he was shot or not. I would not go as far as that. Still—well, I will tell the colonel you are here. I say, Pete, can you live us up a little with your ventriloquism?"

"Might be able to."

"I will see if I can arrange it. The colonel has invited us to supper to-night, Meredith. It is Miss Duncan's twentieth birthday. I was getting afraid that you would not be in time, and that would have been a terrible disappointment to Nina. Half a moment! I will go and see the colonel."

In about five minutes Vance returned with Colonel Duncan, a small, spare man of about fifty years of age. Jack handed him the despatches, which he tore open and glanced at, then he read the letter accompanying them. A smile came over his face as he read, and several times he glanced at Pete, then at Rory.

"I am very pleased to make your friendship, gentlemen!" he exclaimed, shaking hands with all. "And it is very good of you to have undertaken the delivery of these. Pete, if all accounts of you are correct, and seeing their source, I have not the slightest doubt you are going to give us some fun. You see, life here for my daughter is very lonely, and as she is very fond of music—eh!—why, we will bring her a little pleasure on her birthday! You will all have supper with me?"

"Suttinly, old hoss!" answered Pete for the rest. "Ob course, I ought to tell you dat I'm a nigger, and I dunno weder de child will care to associate wid niggers."

"Child, my dear fellow! Nina is twenty!"

"Well, she ain't to be blamed for dat. But see here, old hoss, we shall hab to come like we are, 'cos we ain't brought our dress-clothes, and—"

"Pooh; we don't stand on ceremony here!" interposed Colonel Duncan. "I can tell you we are only too glad to have visitors. You must stay here for a while, and I will let an orderly show you your rooms. Then hurry up as much as you can, and I will tell my daughter the good news that you are coming."

"I think, if you will excuse me, colonel—"

"Not a bit of it! You must come, Meredith; Nina invited you! Your father, the bravest officer I ever knew, was an old friend of mine. I served under him, and don't forget the good advice he gave me."

Meredith's face flushed again, and he bowed his acceptance. Then the two comrades were shown to their rooms, which were comfortably though plainly furnished.

The colonel's room looked really grand. There was massive silver on the table, and an abundance of flowers; then Nina, in evening-dress, entered the room, and she was as unlike her father as it is possible to imagine, being of a tall, well-developed figure, while her hair and eyes were dark.

Vance gazed at her with an expression of unfeigned admiration in his eyes; and there was little wonder at this, for she was very beautiful. He murmured something to her which caused her to smile and reveal teeth as perfect as Pete's.

"So you'm de old hoss' daughter, are you, my dear?" exclaimed Pete, taking her dainty hand as she offered it, and looking at her much as he had looked at Meredith's horse. "Golly! Shouldn't hab tought you would hab been as beautiful as all dat! Not dat de old hoss is ugly, but—"

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See here, old hoss, don't you get telling Nina how beautiful she is, else you will make her conceited!"

"Why, you have just told her!" laughed the colonel.

"Did I? Well, she won't take any notice ob what a nigger says. Don't you get looking in de glass too often, my dear! Are you conceited?"

"Very!"

"Well, dat's a bad fault, and you must try to get ober it; still, I don't wonder at it. I tink I should be conceited if I had got a face like dat. Many happy returns ob de day, my dear! I ain't got you any present, 'cos, you see, we neber knew."

"Thank you very much for your kind wishes, Pete!" exclaimed Nina, smiling at him. Then she shook hands with Jack and Sam, and Pete groaned a little as he saw Jack's eyes fixed upon her.

"You must sit here, Pete," she said, pointing to her right. "You will be able to talk to me about being conceited, and perhaps, Mr. Owen, you will sit on my left?"

"You sit on my right, Sam," said the colonel; "I want to hear about some of your travels."

Vance did not appear to appreciate this arrangement at all. He knit his brows; a habit he had got when things did not go exactly as he liked.

"Then you and I are opposite each other, Meredith," he said. "Perhaps it is just as well that the table is between us, for I know what a pugnacious fellow you are. It would never do for us to have a quarrel. I believe you would make me shiver in my shoes."

Meredith lowered his eyes without saying a word; and when Vance smiled at Jack, that worthy turned away coldly and addressed Nina.

Jack considered Vance's remarks coarse, and quite out of place in the presence of a lady. Nina smiled a little, then she entered into conversation with Meredith, in order to put him at his ease.

"Did you have a pleasant ride, Lieutenant Meredith?" she inquired.

"Yes, Miss Duncan," he answered, glancing at her, then lowering his eyes, much as he had done with Vance. "I met our friends."

"You didn't meet Zuree the Phantom Chief, I suppose?" exclaimed Vance.

"Yes."

"You don't say so? Of course, you gave chase and cut the scoundrel down?"

"No."

"Don't tell me, Meredith; I know your daring. I'm quite certain that you would have dashed at the fellow!"

"Excuse me, Miss Duncan," said Meredith, rising; "excuse me, colonel!" Then, bowing to the others, he left the room.

"That is too bad of you, Harold!" cried the colonel, looking very displeased.

"The cowardly hound annoys me, uncle."

"He is our guest," said Nina, rising and leaving the room.

"Lieutenant Meredith!" she called, as she saw him descending the stairs.

He turned immediately, and stood before her with his eyes lowered.

"Please come back," she said, smiling at him, though he did not see it.

"Do not order me to do so."

"I only wish it."

"Your lightest wish is a command to me."

"I am very angry with Harold for speaking as he did; he had no right."

"I fear he had. It is useless for me to come."

"Will you please come back? Indeed, I wish it."

"Yes; whatever you wish I will do."

"Then please take me in."

Meredith offered his arm, and thus they re-entered the room; while Pete quickly shifted his position, so that Meredith was compelled to sit beside the beautiful girl.

During the meal Nina scarcely spoke to Vance, while she appeared to enjoy Meredith's conversation so much that he became quite eloquent. She was only trying to set him at his ease, but the way she glanced at him filled Vance with fury. However, he concealed it very well, merely making one or two sneering remarks concerning cowardice.

After the meal the company adjourned to the drawing-room. The rest of the evening passed off very pleasantly with singing, ventriloquism, and conjuring tricks, and it was midnight before the comrades went to their respective rooms.

Pete had just extinguished the light, when, on glancing through the open window, he saw a mysterious horseman in the moonlight. He was coming directly towards the fort, and the horse's pace was so great that it seemed to fly over the ground. Both horse and rider were all white,

and the rider appeared to be perfectly motionless in his saddle.

They drew so close that Pete could distinctly see the horseman's face, and he shuddered as he did so, for it was more like a demon's than that of a human being. It was turned towards Pete, and, as the awful-looking creature rode past, he raised his right arm, and the next instant Pete saw something flashing in the moonlight and darting towards his face.

With the quickness of a well-skilled boxer, he ducked his head; and it was well for him he did so, for a broad-bladed knife flashed into the room and stuck into the opposite wall. It would have been buried in Pete's face had he not ducked in time. When he looked out again the mysterious horseman had disappeared round the walls of the fort.

"Well, I must say dis is a nice sort ob ting!" growled Pete, tumbling into bed. "Seems to me dis country ain't as safe as it ought to be!"

Pete turned in for the night, and was soon fast asleep.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Chasing Zuree—The Secret Passage—Attacking the Fort—The Surrender—Meredith Proves His Valour.

THE following morning Pete awoke early, and decided to go for a walk before breakfast. He had not gone far before he came across two men carrying an unconscious man between them.

Pete strode up to them, and was astonished to see that the unconscious man was none other than Meredith. Pete questioned his carriers, and learned that Meredith had been mysteriously shot in the chest.

Meredith was carried inside the fort, and a doctor was summoned. The latter carefully examined his patient, and, with a wry expression on his face, stated that Meredith was in a critical condition.

The latter, however, soon recovered consciousness, and although he was very weak, he stated confidently that he would soon be out and about again.

After breakfast a messenger, who was acting as a scout, brought in some startling news. Zuree, he said, at the head of a large force, was marching on a small village some twenty miles to the south.

The colonel at once decided to go in pursuit, and he left Vance in charge of a few men to guard the fortress. Nina, at the colonel's request, looked after Meredith. The latter was too weak to accompany the colonel on his expedition.

The comrades remained behind. They stayed in the fort all day, and just as the moon was rising they were looking out of the window, when they saw Zuree riding across the open ground.

"Tell you what it is, boys!" exclaimed Pete. "De properest ting for us to do is to capture dat phantom horseman. We can borrow free horses for de purpose. Dis way to London! He ain't got any men wid him!"

Vance raised no objection to their leaving the fort.

In a few minutes the three comrades were riding towards the daring chief, who at once galloped away towards the hills.

"I reckon I could bring him down with a rifle-shot," said Sam; "but somehow I don't like shooting at a man in that manner!"

"You'm quite right, Sammy," answered Pete. "We'm free to one, and if he don't use weapons against us, I don't see dat we can use dem against him. All de same, we'm bound to capture him sooner or later!"

Jack was of the same opinion until the horseman reached the hills, and then they lost sight of him, while beneath the shadows of the trees and bushes it was very difficult to follow his trail.

"Now, Sammy," growled Pete, who was very disappointed at the miscreant's disappearance, "ain't you got any eyes in your head?"

"Well, I reckon I have two in my face!"

"Den use dem, and follow de trail!"

"That's what I am trying to do; but, not being an owl like you, I cannot see in the dark!"

"Pr'aps you would like two-free more moons turned on de job. Neber met such a silly hunter in all my days! Almost wish I had brought Rory. He's a much more sensible dog dan you are!"

"Oh, shut up! Here we are! He appears to have made his way back to the fortress. It is very strange that the demon should be in this neighbourhood, when the colonel had word that he was leading an attack twenty miles or more south!"

"We ain't got anyting to do wid dat, Sammy," observed Pete. "All we hab to do is to capture dat man. Now, de get along dat trail. You ain't a slug, 'cos dat's a sensible animal!"

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The comrades followed the trail until they were quite close to the fort again. They saw nothing of Zuree.

But presently Sam stopped by a clump of bushes on the bank of a small stream flowing from the hills. The horse's trail was quite plain from the spot, but Sam dismounted.

"Now, den, Sammy," growled Pete, "are you groping for blackberries, or are you only trying to find de four-leaved shamrock, 'cos dis trail is like de stream. It flows on."

"I know it does, you silly owl; but the man has dismounted here, and my impression—judging by his impression—is that he hasn't gone on. He has sent his horse onwards without a doubt, but you can see his footprints leading to the stream quite plainly. Look here!"

Sam had followed the footprints into the water.

Jack and Pete sprang off their horses, and they stepped to his side. He was pointing to a narrow tunnel, which looked like a culvert. Bushes grew around so thickly that had it not been for the trail, Sam would never have noticed this tunnel.

"We appear to have run him to ground this time," said Jack; "unless, of course, there is an exit from this place. It is possible that it might be a secret entrance to the fort. I say, I trust it is not, Sam! Look here! There are other footprints, and many of them!"

"Golly! I hope we ain't left dat girl and de wounded man to de tender mercies ob de phantom chief!" growled Pete. "Vance may be all right as far as he goes, but I don't believe he would be any good fighting against long odds. As for Freddy—why, he couldn't do anything in his present condition. All de same, my impression is dat he would fight till he died, 'specially in defence ob Nina. Seems to me de best ting for us to do is to fasten our horses here, and go up dat tunnel. You feel quite sure dat de chief has-done so, Sammy?"

"Yes; there is no doubt about that," answered Sam, who was closely examining the footprints round about the tunnel. "Many men appear to have ascended. They may have gone before him. Jack, I believe your idea is correct, and that this tunnel is a secret passage to the fort. If that is the case, I can quite understand Zuree leading us out of the fort so that he might have as few foes as possible. Very likely he thought that the whole of the remaining garrison would chase him."

"Den, if dat's de case, I'm going first!" declared Pete, pushing his way up the narrow opening, having already fastened his horse to the branch of a tree.

Jack and Sam quickly followed his example. They knew that they might be losing the horses, but that was a minor consideration, for all believed that the passage led into the fort.

It was necessary for them to go on their hands and knees; but, beyond a few turns, they found no obstacles in their way.

They were, of course, in absolute darkness; but they still crept on, the tunnel gradually sloping upwards as they proceeded, and at last they found themselves in a small chamber about twelve feet square.

Jack struck a match, and by its light they saw that the exit from the vault was by an iron door now barred and bolted.

"Dat door has got to come down," said Pete, drawing his axe. "Stand clear, boys. Golly! I can hear de sounds ob fighting!"

Pete paused with his axe uplifted, and the comrades could hear the sounds of rifle-shots, mingled with the hoarse cries of fighting men; and then, for the first time, they realised what a mistake they had made in following Zuree.

But it was too late now for vain regrets, and Pete backed at the doorpost, which was of oak, studded with bolts.

Fire struck from these as Jack's matches went out, but Pete knew pretty well where to hit, and the blows he dealt shook the vault, and echoed through the tunnel. Chips of wood flew in all directions. Pete was putting forth his utmost strength, and his comrades marvelled at the force of his blows.

Meantime, Nina and Meredith were both in an agony of dread, and both were powerless. Vance, at the first alarm,

had quickly got his men together; but the attack was so frightfully sudden that they were in a state of disorder.

All in the fortress had been silent when the Arab's battle-cry rang out. A volley was poured into their midst from the head of the broad staircase, for they had already gained the entrance-hall before the alarm was given.

Vance saw that his men were greatly outnumbered. Nina, who was gazing on the scene, saw it also, and a great dread filled her breast.

Up the broad staircase, in the face of a galling fire, the fierce horde came, and Zuree led them. His hideous face was now inflamed with passion, and he looked positively terrible as he urged his followers on to the attack.

"Dog! You shall die!" yelled Zuree, rushing at Vance, and holding his sword uplifted. "Death or surrender is your choice!"

"I surrender!" cried Vance, slinking back. "Cease firing! We cannot face such odds!"

Nina only waited to see Vance seized by the terrible-looking chief, and then she fled back to Meredith's room.

He had heard the sounds of the strife, and was sitting up on the sofa, from which he had not been removed. His face was deathly white, but his eyes were gleaming in a manner that gave Nina some hope that he would obey her last command.

"Lieutenant Meredith," she cried, handing him a revolver, "the fort has fallen! Zuree has captured Harold Vance! He has surrendered!"

Although in a terribly weak condition, Meredith leapt from the couch, and seized his sword, while he held the revolver in his left hand. Shouts sounded in the passage; the tramp of men's feet.

Then blows were dealt upon the door, and it flew open, while Zuree's hideous face appeared in the doorway.

Then Nina heard the clash of steel, and her eyes were dazzled by the flash of the swords in the torchlight, for many of the Arabs carried torches.

It seemed to Nina that Meredith was possessed of a strength greater than that of a man in full health. Stroke and thrust he dealt, never retreating an inch before the fierce assault of his terrible foe.

The Arabs waited for their leader's command to advance, but they waited in vain, for Zuree, confident of his own strength and skill, was determined to gain the victory unaided.

As for Meredith, he merely intended to sell his life as dearly as his strength would permit. From side to side his sword flashed, and Nina saw a great red gash across the chief's evil face; then she saw Meredith's sword pierce the miscreant's right arm; after that Nina scarcely knew what happened, so terrified was she.

Meredith was forced backwards, then a shriek of agony arose above the howling voices of many men. Meredith had lunged at his adversary's heart, and his sword pierced the Arab's breast to the very hilt.

It was Meredith's last stroke, for he was beaten to the floor, and half a dozen Arabs sprang into the room.

Nina crouched against the wall. Her hands were clasped, and her face was deathly white. Zuree's eyes were fixed upon her, for although so terribly wounded, he had not fallen to the ground. Nina shuddered as she saw that horrible face.

"Ah!" he cried, wrenching the sword from the wound, and raising it above Meredith's head. "He shall die, and you shall live—as my prisoner! He is the last of his race! This is the vengeance of the Arab chief!"

"Charge! Charge, boys! Down wid de foe! Hurrah!"

Then Pete dashed into the room, and, seizing the chief round the body, he hurled him across the room.

The miscreant struck the large pier-glass, which was shivered to atoms, and as he dropped into the fender, glass rattled upon him.

Pete turned, and stood over Meredith's body. A dozen men rushed at him. His axe swept from side to side, and drove them back; then Jack and Sam took up his cheer, and revolvers rattled.

"Down with the foe!" roared Jack.

"Charge! Charge!" came a cry, repeated again and again, until it seemed that a dozen voices were shouting it.

In reality, it was due to Pete's ventriloquism; but it deceived the Arabs, who thought they had many foes to contend with.

Disheartened at their chief's fall, they tried to retreat; but a storm of lead met them, while Pete dashed after them with his axe.

Jack and Sam quickly drew aside, then the three followed up the retreating foe, while the order to "Charge" came from every part of the fort.

The Arabs were completely demoralised. They imagined



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that they had large odds to contend with, and once the retreat was commenced, it soon turned to a hopeless panic.

Pete hurled a couple of the terrified wretches over the balusters, then he and his comrades dashed down the stairs after them, and in the semi-darkness they fought with reckless fury.

Their one aim was to drive those yelling wretches from the fortress, and the Arabs were all too ready to get out of it. They made a rush to the secret passage, but many of them fell wounded by the revolver-shots and the volleys from the repeating-rifles.

"Well, boys," panted Pete, seizing one of the fallen torches, and holding it above his head, "I see none ob us are hurt, and I should say we can claim de victory, 'cos de enemy hab retreated, wid de exception ob de wounded. I don't tink dey will come back again, specially if we lock dis outer door. Let's come and see how dat poor girl and Meredith are!"

Pete, with his axe still in his right hand, led the way up the stairs, on which many wounded men lay. A glance around convinced him that they would do no harm for the present. He reached the room, and then stopped suddenly.

Nina was kneeling by Meredith's side. His eyes were fixed on hers, and he appeared to be trying to speak.

Lower and lower Nina bent; then she pressed her lips to those of the wounded officer, and fell to the floor in a swoon.

"Look after de girl, Jack. Help me to get Freddy on de sofa, Sammy. Stay, I tink I can manage it. Dere we are! Now, den, Sammy, see what you can do for him. I shall stand by de door, and no one will come in while I am dere. Is she wounded, Jack?"

"Not as far as I can see," answered Jack. "You can lock de door, Pete, and bring some water!"

"Comrades," moaned Meredith, "you have saved her! I care for nothing now!"

"Well, dat's a mighty nice ting to say!" growled Pete. "De miserable coward gibs de best of his life to save de girl, and succeeds in doing it, and den he goes and says we hab done it. 'Spect Nina knows better dan dat. Bind him up, Sammy. He will soon get right again. Golly! I would like to know where his cowardice comes in now! I shall hab someting to say to de colonel 'bout dis. Dat's right, my dear. Drink a little ob dat. M'yes! Getting quite all right again now. Yah, yah, yah! And, seeing dat Freddy is all right, too—only he don't want disturbing just at present—too—a bit! Dare say I can lift you into dat chair. M'yes! I tought you wouldn't be too heavy for dat. Now, keep your face to de window, 'cos you get de breeze!"

"You are deceiving me, Pete. Lieutenant Meredith is dead!"

"I tell you he ain't! Don't be so obstinate! He's going to get all right, and I don't tink I shall be able to say so much for Zuree, 'cos dat man has got a nasty wound in his breast!"

"Lieutenant Meredith pierced it with his sword," murmured Nina, trying to glance towards the sofa.

But Pete took good care to stand in her way, for Sam appeared to be very busy, and both he and Jack were looking anxious.

"You needn't boder 'bout dat coward, my dear," murmured Pete. "Dere won't be any call for him to show any more ob his cowardice just at present, 'cos de foes hab all gone. Where's his brave rival got to?"

"Lieutenant Vance surrendered the fortress."

"Well, dat shows his bravery, seeing dat he must hab known what would become ob you. I suppose de coward went on fighting after de surrender?"

"Oh, Pete, he is very brave! Never call him a coward!"

"Yah, yah, yah! I tink I shall. Directly he gets well, I will hab an argument 'bout cowardice wid him. Golly! He didn't look so mighty cowardly, eider, de way he was defending dis door. I feel mighty certain dat he will tink he's a coward, 'cos he didn't go on fighting longer. He will say dat he ought not to hab fallen. I 'spect you know how badly he was wounded, Nina?"

"Indeed, I do! The doctor told me!"

"Bery well. Just fancy a man wounded like dat, habing de strength to get up and fight. It's true it was for you, but I should hab said it was impossible for him to hab moved off de sofa. Now, he's going to get all right. What I am going to do is to ride out and meet de colonel, 'cos we may as well break de news to him. I am going to take de best horse I can find, and it won't be difficult to follow his trail. He ought to be in by de morning, and in de meantime you can stay here wid Jack and Sammy. You see, we don't want to gib dose Arabs time to regain deir courage, and make anoder attack on de place while all de soldiers are away, so I am going to hurry his return. I shall just take de liberty ob stopping up dat passage first ob all."

"They will cut you off, Pete, if you leave the fort," said Nina.

"Nunno, dey won't, my dear. I shall look after dat. Just you help Jack and Sammy to look after de patient, and den we shall be all right."

Then Pete stepped to Meredith's side.

"Feel all right, Freddy?"

"Perfectly! A bit exhausted, but I'm not hurt in any way."

"Well, dat's all right," observed Pete, leaving the room, and motioning to Nina to remain where she was. As a matter of fact, Meredith was unconscious, but Pete had supplied the voice in order to give Nina hope, although it was rather a false one.

As Pete descended the stairs, he was met by Vance, who did not know exactly what had happened; but he left the room where he had been placed a prisoner as soon as the guard fled.

"What has happened?" he demanded, glaring fiercely at Pete.

"Nuffin' ob any importance, old hoss," answered Pete. "You see, de foe entered de place by a private passage, and I'm just going to fill it up, so dat no more can come in."

"I shall attend to that matter."

"Well, you can dabble about wid it after I hab done de work if you like," observed Pete. "I know de way to de magazine, and dat's where I'm going."

Pete made his way to the vault, and that worthy carried the keg of powder a little way into the secret passage, then smashed in the head of the barrel with his axe, and laid a train of powder to the vault.

"Now, you see," he exclaimed, "I am just going to fire dat like so. Golly!"

Pete touched the powder with his torch, and the next moment there was a terrific roar. The vault trembled, white Vance was blown head over heels, and all the hair was singed off his head.

"You mad villain!" he yelled, as the sound of falling masonry followed the explosion.

"Yah, yah, yah!" roared Pete. "Ain't it lucky you ain't hurt. You shouldn't hab stood in de line ob fire. Yah, yah, yah! 'Scuse me laughing at you, but you look mighty funny widout your hair. Your noddle is too flat on de top!"

"You insolent black bound, you might have blown the whole place up!"

"Nunno, dere wasn't enough powder for dat! I hab filled up de passage, and, seeing dat was what I wanted to do, why I'm perfectly satisfied."

"But I'm not perfectly satisfied, you insolent dog!"

"Nunno! I don't 'spect you would be, seeing de way you were blown head ober heels; den, again, I ain't improved de curl ob your moustache, but dat's only a minor consideration. I dare say de ting will grow again, and as you ain't hurt in any way, you ought to feel bery thankful to me. We hab mislaid dose oder free horses, so I am going to borrow anoder one, and den I shall be back when I come. I will just make sure dat de passage is properly blocked up."

There could be no doubt about this, and, having given Vance a good many orders as to how he was to act, and driven him into a state of frenzy thereby, Pete mounted the best horse he could find and rode from the fort in a southerly direction.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Square on the Plain—Victory—Vance's Account of the Attack—Disgraced.

ALL through the night Pete urged his horse onwards, and when day broke he reached the colonel's party returning from their fruitless march.

"Is all well at the fort?" were Duncan's first words.

"M'yes, old hoss! As well as can be expected; de place was attacked, but we beat dem off. I hab come principally to tell you dat dere is a large force ob Arabs between us and de fort, and, seeing dat you hab been sent on a wild-goose chase, it wouldn't be surprising if de Arabs intend to attack you on your way back."

"Well, I shall give them battle. I am determined to put down the rising with a firm hand. But are you sure that you are telling me all that has happened at the fort? Is my daughter safe?"

"Perfectly safe; all de same, she wasn't so mighty safe at one time. De Arabs knew ob a secret passage into de place, and dey made an entry; dat's where de fighting commenced. It ended by de Arabs getting beaten, and when dey bolted I blew up de secret passage, so dere ain't de slightest chance ob dem coming back again!"

"Good! Vance and Meredith—are they all right—and the men?"

"Yes; dere wasn't a single life lost on our side. Freddy ain't as well as he might be 'cos he got wounded in de fight."

"But he couldn't take part in the fight?"

"You wouldn't say so if you had seen him like I did, defending your daughter's life against Zuree, and I should say about a dozen of his followers. Golly! Dat coward fought like a dozen brave men. I dunno where he got his strength from, but I neber saw a man fight more bravely. His last thrust went through Zuree's breast, and de man is lying badly wounded in the fort."

"But where was Vance?"

"You see, he had surrendered, and—"

"Surrendered? Surrendered to a foe who would deal death—or worse than death, to the woman he professes to love! Surrendered? It is impossible!"

"Well, I dunno much about de matter, only what Nina told me, and she said dat she heard Vance surrender."

"Very well," said the colonel. "When we arrive at the fort, I will make an exhaustive inquiry."

All went well with the colonel's party until they sighted the fort, and then a vast party of mounted Arabs rode from the hillside, while they spread out in a manner that left no doubt there intention was to cut off the soldiers.

Colonel Duncan watched their manoeuvres calmly. To Pete it seemed that he was sacrificing the life of every man under his command; all the same, he knew that a man in Duncan's position must know what he was doing, and his men appeared to have absolute confidence in him, so Pete kept close by him, wondering when he was going to give any orders.

Presently the colonel halted his men at a spot where there was a slight depression in the ground, then he gave his orders sharply, and Pete gazed in wonder, for in a remarkably short time he found himself in the centre of a square four deep.

Next there was a prolonged rattle, as the front rank fixed bayonets, then knelt ready for the charge, and now bullets commenced to fly around, but so far not a shot was returned.

Presently a bugle call rang out, and the whole party of Arabs charged down on the little square.

On they came like a white cloud sweeping over the plain. They were yelling at the tops of their voices, but there was a dead silence in the square.

That silence was broken by the colonel's next word of command. The roar of rifles burst forth. From all the ranks in quick succession a deadly fire was poured into the midst of the foe. They wavered, but still on they came. Another volley, then one of the horsemen dashed upon the bristling bayonets. Others came on, and for a moment the square was broken; but the men quickly closed up, and Pete felt as though he would like to be amongst those charging men, so that he might be doing something to help in the conflict.

Charge after charge was delivered, but each time it was beaten back with heavy losses to the daring foe, and at last they turned and fled in wild disorder to the shelter of the hills, while a galling fire followed them.

Within five minutes the little regiment was once more marching forwards, and they reached the fort without any further attack being attempted.

The first thing that the colonel did was to send for Vance, who entered the room with his sword, for he had taken the precaution of getting that when the Arabs had been driven from the place.

"Pete tells me that an attack has been made on the fort, Lieutenant Vance," said the colonel, eyeing the officer keenly.

"Yes, sir," answered Vance. "Shall I make my report now, or would you prefer it in private?"

"It is immaterial. Pete can remain, seeing that I understand he took part in the fight."

"The enemy gained an entrance by a certain secret passage that was unknown to me," said Vance. "The first intimation of their presence that I had was in the entrance-hall, and there I gave them battle. We were outnumbered, I should say, at least, twenty to one, but our men fought with great bravery. Despite every effort on their part, some of the foe ascended the stairs. What happened there I do not rightly know, because we were in the thick of the fray; but the Arabs were beaten off, and then I drew my men upstairs. Your daughter and Meredith were safe."

"Then there was no surrender?" inquired the colonel.

"Well, the Arabs did not exactly surrender, because we drove them from the fort, but—"

"I mean that you did not surrender, and were not taken prisoner?"

"Sir, who has told you such a falsehood? I certainly called upon Zuree to surrender, but—"

"But you yourself did not surrender?"

"Certainly not!"

"Leave the room, sir, and leave that sword upon my table."

"Uncle! Do—"

"Silence! I have acknowledged you as my nephew in private life. We are now dealing with a military matter. Either Pete has lied to me, or you have lied."

"Do I understand, sir, that you take a nigger's word before mine?"

"I am taking the word of neither. I will have facts. I believe that you have spoken falsely to me, if so, you need not think I shall favour you."

"You never have in the past, so that I see no reason why you should in the future."

"I try to act with justice."

"And tell me to leave my sword on your table on the word of a nigger, who happens to hate me. I tell you plainly, Colonel Duncan, that you have been deceived in these three strangers. I firmly believe that they instigated the attack, and led the Arabs up the secret passage. The rest has been a little by-play."

"How is it that your hair is singed off?"

"Oh, I suppose that the nigger has told you about that piece of foolery?"

"No!"

"Well, my first thought after the victory was to block the passage, and I instructed the nigger to do so by blowing it up. He carried a keg of powder into the tunnel, and as I was watching it being fired, the explosion singed off my hair."

"Do you confirm that statement, Pete?"

"'Bout singin' de hair, old hoss? Suttinly! De rest is what you might call a fairy-tale. He neber instructed me to do anything ob de sort, 'cos I did it ob my own accord."

"There is one thing that you forget, Lieutenant Vance," said the colonel; "and that is that my daughter has told Pete, as he assures me, that you surrendered. Now, if you say I have no right to take Pete's word before yours, and that is a fact, I have the right to believe the word of my daughter, who has never yet spoken falsely to me. Again, you appear to forget that, if this is true, I mean what Pete has told me, I can question the men."

"I presume, sir, you would not degrade me in such an insulting manner."

"Well, assure me, on your honour, that you have told me the absolute truth, and you shall take your sword."

"I pledge my word of honour, sir."

"Take your sword, Lieutenant Vance; but remember this, I shall make the strictest inquiry into the matter. It will be thoroughly thrashed out, and, if the facts are not as you state, your punishment will be just as severe as it would have been had you been a stranger to me. You can leave the room."

Vance took his sword, and glared at Pete fiercely, then left the room, merely bowing to the colonel.

A few hours later the colonel conducted a strict inquiry into the matter of Vance's surrender, and although the latter pleaded innocence, and stuck firmly to his story, there was no doubting the evidence.

There were too many witnesses against him, for Vance's story to be believed. He was bowled out all along the line, and in the end he left the fort in disgrace.

Meredith soon recovered from his wounds, and then came the time for him to receive the congratulations of all at the fort. No man could have done more, and when Nina entered the room to congratulate him, Meredith felt that he had not passed through such terrible times for nothing.

Meredith was extremely fond of Nina, and from that day a great friendship sprang up between them, and before the comrades took their departure, they learned, to their satisfaction, that the colonel had agreed to the engagement between Meredith and his daughter Nina.

THE END.

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