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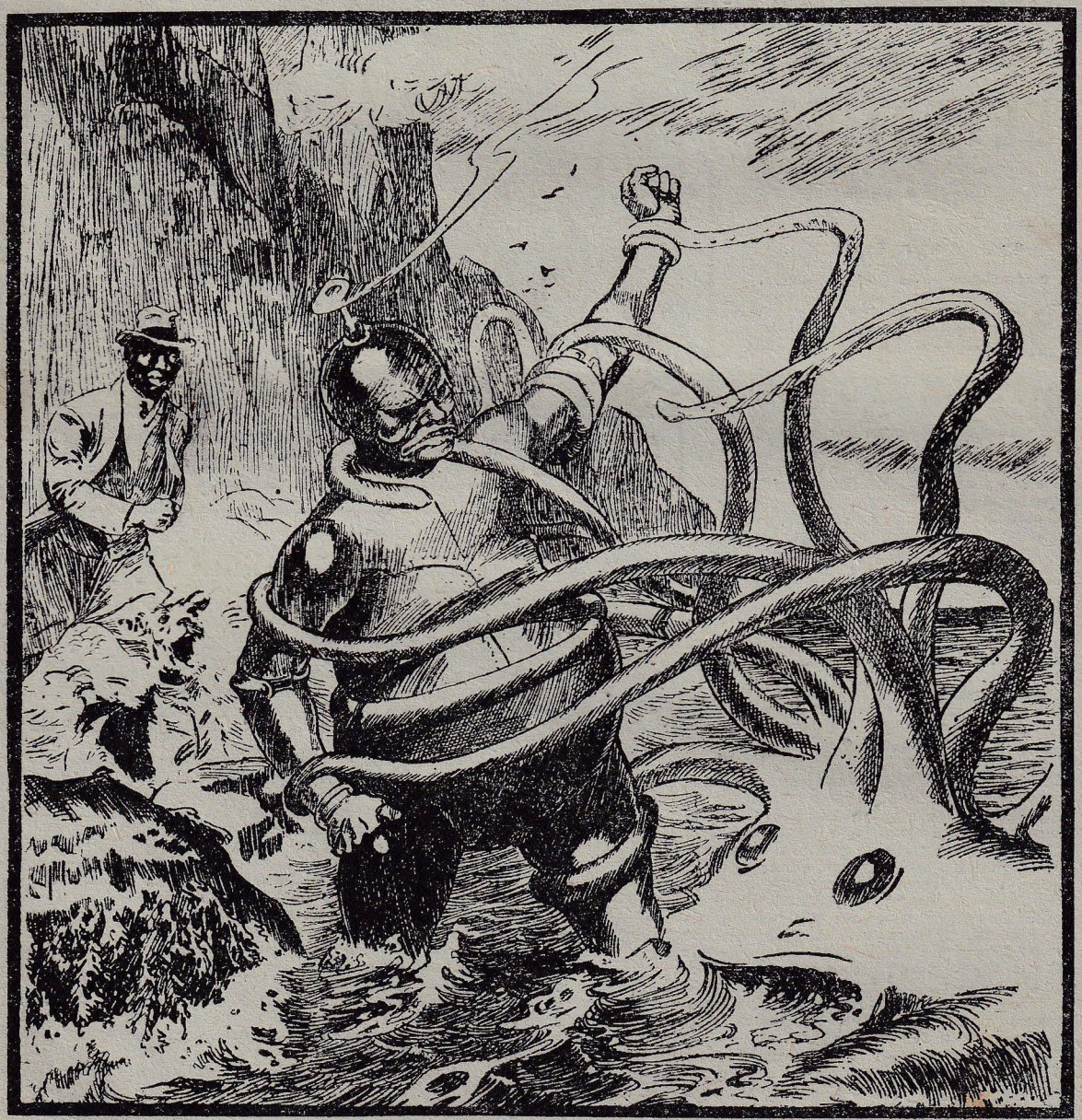

STEAM MAN versus OCTOPUS!

(A thrilling scene from the grand long complete story of Jack, Sam, and Pete contained in this issue.)

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THE 1d POPULAR

PUBLISHED EVERY FRIDAY

THE POACHER'S PLIGHT!

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

SEXTON BLAKE,

the World-Famous

DETECTIVE.

As Alphonse spoke, he made a grab at the bird, for the possession of which there began a fiery struggle; and by the time the rest of the party had gathered around the spot the pheasant had been denuded of nearly all its feathers.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Good News—The List of Guests.

ONE morning in the early part of September, when London was stewing in the rays of a blazing sun, Sexton Blake entered his consulting-room, to find Tinker reclining on a big couch by the window, with Pedro stretched out by his side.

For the past week an air of mystery had hovered around the detective, and there was now something in his manner which suggested that the secret—if there was one—was to be let out. Having flung his hat upon the table, he crossed over to the couch, and looked down at his young assistant very tenderly, and put a caressing hand on his head.

"Not feeling very bright, are you?" he asked.

"No, I'm not." Tinker dully replied. "I feel as if I wanted to do nothing but rest."

"I know—I know. Our recent hard work, and the hot weather we have been having, have overtaxed your strength. You need a holiday, and so do I. And we are going to have one."

"Where, guv'nor?"

"In the country."

"And for how long?"

"For at least a month."

"So long as that? Oh, how ripping!"

The good news had already transformed the lad. His eyes were bright, and there was a tinge of colour on his cheeks. He sat erect, and looked expectantly at Sexton Blake, who was pacing to and fro with his hands in his pockets.

"I have been trying to get hold of a suitable place," he said, "and my agent has just found one for me. It is an old mansion known as Malloway Hall, and it is situated down in the Midlands, near the little station and village of Carlton Royal. The estate is a large one, and the game coverts are well stocked. The owner, Squire Malloway, has been ordered abroad for his health. He wished to let the house with the shooting, and I have taken both for a period of six weeks, which will run from now until the end of October. We will go down in a few days, and amuse ourselves with the partridges until the end of the month, when we will begin to bang at the pheasants."

"My word, won't that be glorious?" cried Tinker, going through the imaginary motions of raising and firing a gun. "There is nothing I should like better. We will have the house to ourselves, I suppose."

"The staff of servants will be there," Blake answered, "and also the squire's nephew, Drake Pentland, who will shoot with us. He remains to look after the business of the estate, and he will no doubt prove to be a decent fellow. He is his uncle's heir, I believe."

"Isn't Squire Malloway married?"

"No, he is a bachelor, and an old man. In his early years he sustained a loss that clouded his whole life. The agent told me something of his story, which is a sad one. That does not concern us, however."

"I am glad he has given us this chance, guv'nor."

"So am I, my boy, and we must share our pleasure with others. Now that I have the opportunity, I propose to entertain a shooting-party."

"I was just thinking of that. Have you picked out the guests?"

"Yes, I have made a mental list of them. They will form rather a mixed company, but they will all enjoy themselves, I imagine, at Malloway Hall."

"Who are they to be?" asked the lad. "You will include Roger Blackburn and his wife, won't you?"

"Yes, they are first on the list," Sexton Blake replied; "and then come Maurice Ormsdale and his sister Linda, who had such a narrow escape from death out in British Columbia several months ago. I shall also ask Mr. and Mrs. Bedford-Parke; the little man is a good sort, and if he joined our party his wife won't be able to nag at him so much. They must both be invited, for the estimable lady would not let her husband come alone."

"No, you may be sure of that. And who next?"

"We must not forget our friends Alphonse Duval and Gaston du Nord. I have no doubt that they will come over from Paris, for they love England, and they profess to be fond of sport."

"And they will make lots of fun for us—eh?" observed Tinker.

"I shall be very much surprised if they don't," the detective answered, with a smile.

"So shall I, guv'nor. Is that all, or are there more on the list?"

"A few more. We will wind up with Mr. Kempton Hurst, and Lady Augusta Towers, and Sir Malcolm Herbert, the Government secretary."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea to have Inspector Widgeon," suggested the lad.

"I should like to have him," said Blake, "but he is very busy at present, and cannot get away. However, we might ask him down later. And now, my boy," he added, "suppose you lend me a hand with the invitations."

"Right you are!" exclaimed Tinker. "You have cured me, guv'nor. I feel as if there was nothing the matter with me."

As he spoke he sprang briskly up from the couch, and soon he and the detective were seated at the large table, writing out the notes of invitation to the shooting-party at Malloway Hall.

"That finishes the lot," declared the lad, an hour later, as he put aside his pen.

"No, there is one more person that I have forgotten to put on the list," replied Sexton Blake, reaching for a fresh sheet of paper. "I met Professor Platinum the other day, and he looked as if he needed a holiday badly. I will ask him to join us, and if he doesn't care to shoot he can collect insects and botanical specimens."

. . . . . .

It was the last day of September, and down in the Midlands on that sunny afternoon, while guns were popping and partridges were falling—pheasant shooting had not yet begun—a waggonette and a smart trap were rolling along a pleasant country road, in the shade of trees that formed a canopy overhead. The former vehicle was in charge of a groom who wore the Malloway livery, and in the trap were Sexton Blake, Tinker, and Mr. Drake Pentland, the latter a good-looking young man of twenty-seven, well tailored, with dark eyes and hair, and clean-shaved, supercilious features that were set off by a monocle. Blake had not been any too favourably impressed by the squire's nephew, but he had made himself agreeable to him, since his company could not be dispensed with.

Some of the shooting-party had already arrived at Malloway Hall, and the detective was now on his way to meet the remaining contingent of guests, who were due from London at three o'clock. Every one of the invitations had been accepted, and Tinker, knowing what elements of amusement were to be brought together, was looking forward to having the time of his life.

"Will we shoot to-morrow, guv'nor?" he inquired.

"No, I think not," Blake answered. "We will give our friends an easy day of it, and start shooting on the following morning."

"That will ensure us better sport," put in Drake Pentland. "For our neighbours will be out to-morrow, and a lot of birds will be driven on to our property. But my uncle's coverts are well stocked, as it is," he added. "There are plenty of pheasants, in spite of the poachers who are always at work."

"It is difficult to put a stop to that sort of thing, I suppose," said the detective.

"It is more than difficult, Mr. Blake," was the reply. "There are two men, father and son, who have been in prison more than once. But it doesn't do them any good; as soon as they are released they are at the old game again. And there is another one, a young fellow, who is so cunning that he has never been caught. He is known to be a confirmed poacher, but we can't get proof of his guilt. He is as bold as he is clever, and I imagine that he would not hesitate to commit murder if he were to be cornered. Either that, or some day a charge of shot, fired by one of the keepers in self-defence, will put an end to his career."

And as Drake Pentland spoke a sinister gleam flashed to his eyes, and a savage expression flitted across his face, as if he devoutly wished that one or the other of his predictions might come true.

"Poaching often leads to more serious crimes," Sexton Blake said gravely; and the lad nodded assent.

The subject was dropped. The village of Carlton Royal had now been reached, after a drive of three miles; and a few moments later the two vehicles drew up before the little rural station, and the occupants of the trap got out, and went through the booking-office to the platform, which was a quiet and idle place during the greater part of the day, as the railway was an unimportant branch line.

After the train had arrived, and Blake's guests had safely disembarked, the detective's attention was drawn to a young girl, uncommonly pretty, of perhaps twenty, simply but neatly dressed, with dark eyes and hair.

"Isn't that Miss Bessie Lurcomb?" asked Tinker.

"Yes; she is the gamekeeper's daughter," the detective replied. "Lurcomb told me, I remember, that she had gone to spend several days with an aunt in a neighbouring village. I dare say she is waiting for her father to come for her."

"She is awfully pretty, guv'nor!"

"She is certainly very attractive, my boy."

"There goes Mr. Pentland. I believe he means to speak to her."

"It looks like it, Tinker."

Drake Pentland was sauntering towards the girl, who, when accosted by him, did not appear to be at all pleased. Her face was cold and indifferent, and she shook her head several times during an inaudible conversation that lasted for several minutes. The squire's nephew then lifted his cap and moved away, and a moment later there came on to the platform and approached the keeper's daughter a slim, good-looking young man, with fair hair and a brown moustache, clad in shabby tweeds that fitted him with an easy grace.

At sight of him the girl's face flushed and brightened, and her lips parted in a winsome smile. She gave him her hand, and the two began to talk in low tones, their heads close together.

"That must be the girl's lover!" Tinker said enviously.

"There is some reason to think so," the detective answered.

"Mr. Pentland don't seem to like it, guv'nor."

"So I perceive, from his unpleasant expression."

Meanwhile, before the departure of the train, the porter had removed the luggage from the compartment in which Blake's guests had travelled, and they were now looking over it to see if anything had been missed. For a short interval the young couple at the end of the platform continued their tete-a-tete, their eyes speaking as eloquently as words, and then they were interrupted by the appearance of an elderly man, bearded and broad-shouldered, who wore brown velveteens.

"There is Lurcomb, the head-keeper," said the detective.

"He is scowling," whispered Tinker. "Somebody is going to get into trouble, I'll bet!"

The lad was right. Bessie Lurcomb's face showed alarm as soon as she saw her father, who laid a rough hand on the young man, and swung him round.

"You scoundrel! How dare you speak to my child?" he exclaimed, in an angry voice that reached the ears of Blake and his companions. "Have you forgotten what I told you? Get out of this at once, and don't let me catch you with Bessie again!"

The girl was silent, and the young man, whose cheeks had crimsoned, made no reply. Without a word, he strode off. And when he had disappeared, the gamekeeper took his daughter's arm and led her quickly away.

Drake Pentland looked after them with a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes. Alphonse and Gaston and the others were still standing by the luggage, which the porter was stacking on a truck.

"Who was that young fellow, Pentland?" inquired the detective. "I am rather interested in him."

"His name is Dick Kildare, and he is the rascal I was speaking of a little while ago," replied the squire's nephew. "He is the poacher who plays the deuce with our game."

"Ah, that accounts for Lurcomb's aversion to him! But he had a gentlemanly appearance. He didn't look in the least like a poacher."

"He is one, all the same. I am longing for the day when he will be laid by the heels."

"Tell me more of him. Does he poach for a living?"

"I don't know anything about that. He has a little money, I believe, but it can't be much. Five or six years ago he came to the neighbourhood with his father, who bought a small place called Hollyhock Cottage, on the edge of my uncle's estate. The father died three years ago, and since then the son has been living in the cottage alone, and helping himself to our birds and hares. He is an idler and a scoundrel!"

"And in love with Lurcomb's pretty daughter—eh?"

"I imagine that he is, Mr. Blake, from what I have seen. But he will never marry the girl."

"One might suppose that there was some mystery about him," suggested Sexton Blake.

"There may be," replied Drake Pentland, a queer, furtive expression crossing his face as he spoke. "I don't know, and I don't care. All that concerns me is how to get rid of him."

"It is a great pity that he has fallen into evil ways," said the detective, "for he looks as if he was meant for something better. I should like to have a talk with him some time."

The sun was sinking in the west, and there was a delicious coolness in the air. The vehicles containing the guests rolled on for three miles, along the winding road and across the home park, and stopped before the ivy-clad, stately, Georgian mansion. The door was opened by Slipper, the squire's grey-

haired old butler, who stood bowing and scraping while a footman took the luggage in.

The newly-arrived guests were shown upstairs to their rooms, and shortly afterwards, on coming down to the wide hall, they found assembled there by a blazing fire, ready for tea, the other guests, consisting of the Blackburns, and Maurice Ormsdale and his sister, Sir Malcolm Herbert, and Lady Augusta Towers, who was an earl's daughter, young and attractive, and intensely fond of sport.

By the time tea was over, and pipes and cigars had been set alight, all of the company were acquainted with one another, and were on the best of terms. Mrs. Bedford-Parke was lauding the advantages of Chiswick to Kempton Hurst; Alphonse and Gaston were paying Gallic attentions to the Lady Augusta, and Professor Platinum was talking to Sir Malcolm Herbert. And as Sexton Blake moved among his guests, bestowing a few words on each, he felt that his shooting-party promised to be a great success.

"If it goes off well, I'll give another one next year," he reflected, "provided I can find a suitable place."

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Trespasser—Caught—The Witness.

THE sun rose in a cloudless sky the next morning, but as the detective had ordained that the day should be one of rest, and of lounging about, the pheasants were spared, and no popping of guns was heard on the Malloway Hall estate. The keepers kept near the house, holding frequent discussions with Blake in regard to the morrow's sport; and thus a fairly clear field was afforded for a young man, who, late that afternoon, might have been seen stealing through the coverts with his hands in his pockets.

Slowly, warily, he made his way on, trampling bracken and fern, once in a while startling a hare or a pheasant; now pausing to listen, now darting across an open glade. At length he reached a dense fir-wood, and when he had got nearly through it, and could glimpse the chimney of a cottage that was hidden by foliage not far ahead of him, his heart gave a quick throb. A slim and lovely girl, robed in a pink frock, that matched the soft colouring of her cheeks, was moving towards him, picking wild-flowers as she approached. Nearer and nearer she came, with lagging steps; and suddenly, looking up, she saw the young man within a couple of yards of her.

"Oh, Dick!"

"Bessie, my darling!"

There was a hush for a moment. The two stood there quietly, in a golden ray of sunlight. Bessie Lurcomb's bosom was heaving, and there was a look of anxiety on her pretty face.

"How you startled me!" she exclaimed, in an agitated voice.

"Are you not glad to see me?" said Dick Kildare.

"Of course I am! But you ought not to have come."

"Why not? I have no gun or dog?."

"You have no right to be here, Dick, on the squire's land!"

"I know that. I took the risk, though. I have been lonely and depressed, and I wanted you to cheer me up. Where is your father—at home?"

"No; I think he is at the Hall. But he may return at any minute and look for me. He was very angry yesterday, and he would be furious if he were to find us here together."

"Are you afraid of being caught? Shall I go at once?"

"How can I answer that, Dick? I don't want you to go, but for your sake and mine——"

The girl could not finish the sentence, for Dick Kildare had clasped her in his strong arms, and was kissing her lips and cheeks. They stood thus for a little time, all forgotten but the happiness of the present, and then Bessie Lurcomb gently released herself from her lover's embrace.

"We are doing wrong, Dick," she murmured.

"Don't call it that," the young man said huskily. "I love you so! You are all the world to me!"

"And I love you, dear! I always will! Yet I fear we can never be more to each other than we are now."

"Do you mean to let your father stand between us and spoil our lives?"

"How can I help it?" replied the girl. "He will never consent to our marriage, I am sure. And you can't honestly blame him, can you? Much as I love you, I could not be the wife of a dishonest man. Oh, if only you were not a poacher! Why do you do it?"

"There are different kinds of poaching," said Dick Kildare, as a hot blush of shame mounted to his cheeks. "I am not like that rascal Ben Leach and his son, who will shoot one of the keepers some day, or be shot themselves!"

"No; you are not like them," assented Bessie, with a sigh.

"I am not really bad at all," declared the young man. "I wish I could explain to you—it is hard to do so. I was born somewhere in England, and I think it must have been in the country, for the fever of poaching is in my blood. I am passionately fond of Nature. I love the woods, and a gun and a dog, and all things that creep and crawl and fly. I can't help it. I was made like that, and the instinct grew stronger after my father's death."

"You should not have yielded to it, Dick."

"I had to, dear. The temptation was more than I could resist. And there is another way of looking at it. I am poor, and my neighbours are rich. Out in wild Australia, where I spent the greater part of my life, I could shoot where and what I pleased. But here in England, where a few men own all the land, and are selfish with it, I am barred from honest sport, because of my poverty. So I help myself to the squire's game, and it does no harm. He doesn't miss the few birds and hares that I kill."

"But it is dishonest, Dick. It is the same as stealing."

"I suppose it is. I don't deny that. I have been trying to make excuses, but they are poor ones. I am an idle, worthless fellow, when all is said!"

"You need not be," the girl told him, with a wistful, pleading look in her eyes. "I have asked you more than once to change your ways, and you promised to think over it."

"I have thought over it," Dick Kildare replied, his expression brightening, "and I see that my only chance of winning you for my wife is by making an honest man of myself. And I intend to do that. I made up my mind to-day that I would stop poaching, and find some employment."

"You really mean it?"

"I do, Bessie. I will keep my word. And one of these days, when I have redeemed my character, and can look any man in the face, and have saved enough money to——"

"Hark!" Bessie interrupted. "What is that? Oh, somebody is coming towards us!"

"I hope it isn't your father!"

"It must be!"

The young man would have retreated, but it was too late. A twig had snapped, and now, as a clump of bushes were parted, big, burly Joe Lurcomb strode through them, and saw his daughter and her lover. The next instant he was by their side, his eyes blazing, his rugged features distorted with passion.

"You—you scoundrel!" he spluttered. "You here again with my Bessie, in spite of all my warnings! So that's what she does when I am out of the way!"

"No; it is my fault!" vowed Dick Kildare, who had turned very pale, but was holding his ground unflinchingly.

"I dare say it is!" exclaimed the keeper. "The girl would obey me if you would let her alone! You good-for-nothing, worthless vagabond!"

"Only give me a chance to prove I am not. That is all I ask of you," replied the young man.

"You will get no chance from me, nor any encouragement. Gaol is the place for you, and I'll land you there yet, mark my word! I would rather have the squire's nephew hanging round Bessie than you. He is a scamp, and you are a worse one!"

"I am not, Mr. Lurcomb."

"I say you are!"

"Don't be harsh with him!" pleaded the girl. "Dick is in earnest. I am certain he will keep his word."

"Nonsense!" replied her father. "He can't get round me like that! I would rather see you married to the commonest lout in yonder village! Now, then, you insolent dog," he went on, glaring at the young man, "am I to summons you for trespassing, or will you swear to have nothing more to do with my Bessie?"

"I'll make no such promise!" was the firm answer.

"If I ever catch you with her again I'll break every bone in your body!"

"I am not afraid of your threats," Dick Kildare said calmly. "I don't intend to give your daughter up, and I am sure she doesn't want me to. She will be true to me, and the day will come when I will make her my wife, whether you agree to it or not!"

"You will, will you?" fairly shouted the gamekeeper. "You dare to tell me that you will entice my daughter from her home, and marry her without my consent! You have the audacity to tell me that to my face! You impertinent young ruffian, I'll—I'll——"

"Stop, father, stop!" begged Bessie.

"Get out of my way!" snarled Joe Lurcomb.

And with that, enraged beyond control, he thrust his daughter aside, and sprang at the young man, and dealt him a blow that stretched him on his back.

"Is that enough for you?" he exclaimed. "If it isn't, I'll give you another, and as many more as you want!"

The girl had burst into tears, and was wringing her hands. Dick Kildare slowly rose to his feet, his lip cut by the blow,

and confronted his assailant. He was breathing hard, there was a savage gleam in his eyes, and his face was white with passion. He reaised his clenched fists, and lowered them with an effort.

"No man ever dared to strike me before!" he cried fiercely. "By heavens, I will pay you for that! You'll be sorry for it, Mr. Lurcomb!"

"Oh, don't talk like that!" sobbed Bessie. "You don't mean it, Dick, do you?"

"Of course I do!" panted the young man, in his hot anger.

"He looks as if he did," said the keeper. "I'll be on my guard against him after this."

But already Dick Kildare's savage expression was gone, his mood had softened.

"I can't strike the father of the girl I love!" he muttered sullenly. "Good-bye, Bessie! Think as well of me as you can."

"I will," Bessie told him, in a choking voice.

And with dim eyes she gazed after her lover, who had turned and walked off, and was quickly hidden by the foliage.

"Come, my lass," Joe Lurcomb said roughly—"come along! You and I are going to have a serious talk, and if good advice won't bring you to your senses, I'll find another way to do it. Ah, if only your mother had lived! She would have known how to deal with you."

He took the weeping girl by the arm and led her off, and a few seconds later, when they had disappeared among the trees, Drake Pentland stepped out from behind a clump of bushes, looking, as usual, as spruce as if he had just left the hands of his tailor. He glanced towards the gamekeeper's cottage and then in the direction taken by Dick Kildare.

"It was fortunate that I happened to stroll this way," he said to himself, half-aloud. "That was an interesting little scene, and I am glad that I did not miss it. A quarrel, a blow, and a threat uttered in the presence of a witness. I wonder if I can't turn all that to my advantage in some way. I will think it over, at all events. I am prepared to run any risk, short of one thing, in order to get rid of that fellow Kildare. If he knew who he was—if he knew what I know about him—he would do me out of a fortune. It is curious that his father left him in ignorance. But there may be papers that he has never found. The truth may come to light any day. My uncle is not particularly fond of me, as it is, and he would be only too willing to throw me over, and put in my place as his heir a nephew who bears the name of Malloway. But it shall never come to that, I swear! And I don't mean to lose my pretty Bessie if I can help it. Once her lover is disposed of, I'll have my way with her."

Drake Pentland shrugged his shoulders, and stood for a moment in deep thought, and then bent his steps towards the Hall.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Rivals In Love—The Shoot—Tinker's Trick.

"WHAT a glorious day!" said Tinker.

"Ripping—eh, what?" drawled Kempton Hurst, as he impaled on his fork a kidney that had been eluding him.

"It could not be better," observed Sexton Blake.

The weather was indeed perfect, flawless. It was the morning of the second day of October, and the sun was streaming brightly through the windows of the big dining-room of Malloway Hall, where Blake's guests were enjoying a hearty breakfast preparatory to setting forth to slaughter the unsuspecting pheasants. It was such a meal as is served at country-houses in the autumn. On the long table were toast and slices of bread, urns of tea and coffee; on the buffet were cold joints of beef and mutton, game-pies, and dishes of kidneys and bacon. Some of the party were seated, some standing, others moving about with plates in their hands. The men were attired in gaiters and heather-mixture tweeds, while the ladies wore high boots, and tailor-made costumes with short skirts.

Formality was lacking, conversation was animated and incessant. Mrs. Bedford-Parke was talking to Roger Blackburn, and the while keeping an eye on her husband, who had attached himself to Linda Ormsdale. And Alphonse and Gaston, looking like two bantams, were hovering around Lady Augusta Towers, who had enslaved their hearts, and was secretly amused by their devotion to her, and by the jealousy they showed to each other.

After a time the party passed out to the terrace, where, in the brilliant sunshine, the keepers were waiting, Sexton Blake having arranged everything with them on the previous day. Not all of the guests were going to the shoot, however, some having made different plans. Professor Platinum meant to search for botanical specimens, and Marjorie Blackburn was to take a long walk in company with Mr. and Mrs. Bedford-Parke. Without delay they set off, with the understanding that they would join the shooters at the luncheon hour; and the others then made their way to the appointed place, which was less than a mile from the Hall. It was customary to have a loader for each man, but Blake had concluded to dispense with their services on this occasion, and for the next few days, as he did not care to have the birds killed off too rapidly.

"How long do you suppose we shall have to wait?" he inquired of the head-keeper.

"Not very long, sir, I should think," replied Joe Lurcomb. "The beaters were sent round some time ago, and by now they should be working this way."

The place chosen for the first battle was at the edge of a long stretch of open ground, with wooded cover in the rear and to the left; and when the party had taken their positions, which were at regular intervals apart, the detective found himself near the middle of the line, having Sir Malcolm Herbert and others on his left, while to the right of him were Alphonse and Gaston, and then Tinker.

"I hope those Frenchmen won't hit any of us by mistake," Blake had said to the lad before the group separated.

"It is not likely that they will, guv'nor," Tinker had answered, in rather an odd voice. "Don't worry about it."

The keeper's prediction was to be verified. A quarter of an hour dragged by in silence, while the sun beat fiercely down; and then, from the woods on the left, a single pheasant came on fleet wing. It was promptly dropped by Sir Malcolm Herbert, and a second, following immediately afterwards, fell to Maurice Ormsdale's gun. A whole bunch next appeared, and those that passed by the detective—he bagged three of them—were shot farther down the line.

The sport had now begun, and it waxed more exciting. Faster and faster came the beautiful brown birds, driven from cover by the beaters, who were warming to their work. Bang—bang—bang—bang! So it went on for a considerable time, the guns popping merrily, and waking echoes far across the woodlands. There were high shots, and wide shots, with, of course, some misses. Lady Augusta Towers made a particularly fine record, and everyone also did well except Alphonse and Gaston, who, much to their chagrin, failed to bring down a single pheasant, though they wasted plenty of powder.

"That is about all," Blake said at length. "We may as well be moving on."

"I think so, sir," assented the keeper, who was standing behind him.

As he spoke, however, another bunch of birds broke from the woods, eight or nine in number. The guns on the left popped at them briskly, and they had been reduced to three by the time they got opposite to the detective, who dropped two of them. Tinker blazed away at the remaining pheasant, and at the same instant the two little Frenchmen let fly at it simultaneously. And as they saw it fall they ran towards it, waving their guns and cheering loudly.

"What joy!" exclaimed Alphonse, as he picked up the bird.

"What rapture!" cried Gaston.

"But it is my pheasant!"

"Pardon me, but it is mine!"

"I shot it myself, my dear Gaston!"

"I swear to you, my dear Alphonse, that it was I who shot it!"

As Alphonse spoke, he made a grab at the bird, for the possession of which there began a fiery struggle; and by the time the rest of the party had gathered around the spot the pheasant had been denuded of nearly all its feathers, and the two combatants, while still clinging to the prize, were pummelling each other with their free hands.

"Come, come, this won't do!" Sexton Blake said sharply, as he forced the little men apart, and held them at arm's-length.

"It is my bird!" declared Gaston.

"Not so; it is mine!" shouted Alphonse. "You shall not have him!"

"You tell ze lie, Alphonse! You know you cannot shoot well."

"Can I not? I will prove to you better, you pig, Gaston! Let another pheasant make to appear, and I will show you how I kill him! I will be ready now—so!"

With that Alphonse pulled a cartridge from his pocket, and as he was about to jam it into his gun it was taken from him by Kempton Hurst, who examined it curiously.

"This is no good," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "It contains nothing but powder."

"Impossible!" ejaculated Alphonse.

"And what of mine, monsieur?" asked Gaston, as he produced one of his own cartridges.

"It is the same as the other," Kempton Hurst told him. "It is a blank one, containing no shot."

"We have been deceived!" vowed Alphonse.

"Truly we have!" assented Gaston. "We come to shoot ze game, and some evil person has made game of us."

They looked at each other, and then glared suspiciously at their companions.

"Who killed the bird?" inquired Lady Augusta.

"It was you who did that, Tinker!" the detective said sternly. "What do you know of this trick that has been played on my guests?"

It was evident from his face that the lad was guilty. He flushed under his master's accusing eyes.

"I did it, guv'nor," he answered, in a faltering tone. "I was afraid they might hit somebody, so I changed their cartridges. I had some blank ones that I brought from London."

"Ah, what wickedness!" cried Alphonse, clenching his fist.

"What fools he has made of us!" raved Gaston.

"Shall we give him a beating, my dear Gaston?"

"Assuredly we will, my dear Alphonse!"

And with that they made a dash for Tinker, who, judging discretion to be the better part of valour, took to his heels and sped into the woods. The little Frenchmen pursued him for some distance, and then, having lost sight of him, they returned to their companions, and were supplied with good cartridges, which to some extent appeased their wrath. And when the lad ventured back, after a time, he got off with a reprimand from his master.

Blake and his guests moved on to two more positions in the course of the morning, but Alphonse and Gaston, though they had plenty of opportunities, failed to hit any of the birds that were driven over by the beaters.

On reaching the spot where they were to have luncheon, towards one o'clock, the party found Marjorie Blackburn waiting for them, with Professor Platinum and Mr. and Mrs. Bedford-Parke. Here also were a pony and trap, and two servants from the Hall, and a huge hamper; and when a cloth had been stretched on the grass, and the tempting contents of the hamper had been spread out upon it, all sat down, and started eating and drinking.

It was a very pleasant meal.

Drake Pentland, who was the first to rise, put on his cap and shouldered his gun. He had been quiet all the morning, with the air of a man who had something on his mind.

"I'll be off now, Blake," he said, "if you will all excuse me."

"Are you compelled to leave us?" asked the detective.

"Yes, unfortunately," was the reply. "I have some letters to write, and some other business to attend to, in connection with the estate."

And, with a careless nod to Blake and a bow to the ladies, the squire's nephew took his departure.

"I hope he isn't going to hang around my cottage," reflected Joe Lurcomb, who, with the under-keepers, had been eating his midday meal near by. "If I catch my fine gentleman with Bessie, I'll give him as good as I gave young Kildare! Why can't he stick to his own class?"

By the time the hamper had been repacked and the servants had placed it in the trap, the shooting-party were on their way to another drive, where they were expected at a certain hour by the beaters. Having thoroughly enjoyed the remainder of the day, and bagged in all thirty or forty brace of birds, they set off for home late in the afternoon; and, as they were traversing a belt of woods, in the fading glow of the sunset, Sexton Blake happened to look down a long, narrow pheasant-run that he was passing. He paused for an instant, dropped into his swinging gait again, and turned to the lad.

"I had a glimpse of Drake Pentland just now," he said, "a couple of hundred yards off."

"He is looking for us, perhaps," replied Tinker.

"No; his course was the same as ours—towards the Hall. He has been back there since he left us, though, for he was not carrying a gun."

"Then it looks as if the excuse he made wasn't true, guv'nor."

"Possibly it was not, my boy. On the other hand, he may have worked for a couple of hours, and come out for a stroll."

Twenty minutes later the party arrived at Malloway Hall, where they found Drake Pentland, in slippers and smoking-jacket, lounging in a basket-chair, with a pipe in his mouth.

"You must have had rather a lonely time of it, Pentland," observed the detective.

"I have had a busy time," drawled the young man, with a quick, furtive glance at Blake. "I have been writing all the afternoon, and have just finished. No doubt you would all like to have a cup of tea before you dress for dinner," he added, as he reached for a bell-cord.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Poachers—The Noise in the Spinney—The Alarm.

BETWEEN ten and eleven o'clock that night, while all of the members of the shooting-party except Drake Pentland—he had retired to bed early on the plea of having a headache—were sitting round a comfortable fire, a man with a grizzled beard, and a youth of little more than twenty, were abroad on Squire Malloway's estate, and for no good purpose.

A yellow dog, of the lurcher type, hung at the heels of the two, who were father and son. They were notorious poachers, but, unlike Dick Kildare, they stole the squire's game to sell, and they were ever ready to offer violence should they be in danger of being caught. They had twice been in prison, and they did not mean to be put there again if they could help it.

"You've hardly spoke a word since we started," said old Ben Leach, who carried a gun. "What ails you, lad?"

"Nothing in particular," replied young Jasper, in a sulky tone. "But I didn't want to come out to-night. I have a sort of feeling that we are going to get into trouble."

"Don't talk rubbish! What put that into your head?"

"I don't know."

"Well, hold your tongue about it! There's less to fear to-night than on other nights. No doubt the keepers are abed, after being on the go all day."

"You can never count on Joe Lurcomb!" muttered the youth. "He has it in for us!"

"And we have it in for him!" declared Ben Leach, with an oath. "I ain't anxious to meet him—I'm a bit too hot-tempered—but I should like to pay him what we owe him, meaning a sound thrashing with a big stick."

"We'd be clapped in gaol for it."

"Ay; there's the rub! But I tell you this, lad. If Lurcomb should ever corner us again I would be tempted to shoot him!"

"And I would do the same, father, rather than be taken! We would be suspected, but it wouldn't be easy for the police to prove that we did it."

The conversation ceased, and at intervals the poachers stopped to listen, and to peer around them, as they made their way through wood and covert, and across open ground, taking care that they did not leave any footprint or disturb rough herbage, lest the course that they followed nightly should be betrayed, and enable the keepers to set a trap for them.

The two were on their usual round—it had proved a lucrative one for weeks past—and, from the precautions they had hitherto observed, they had every reason to feel themselves secure. True figures of evil, with swarthy, sinister features, they wormed through fern and bracken, displaying arts of woodcraft that had been learned by long experience in the school of Nature.

They had set many wire snares along their route, and from these snares, which were cunningly hidden, they took now a hare, now a rabbit, now a partridge, or a pheasant. The younger man extricated the game, and slipped it into a capacious sack that was under his coat, while the father, who carried a gun on his shoulder, stood alertly by, gazing into the gloom from force of habit. They had other ways of taking birds, but it was not a suitable night for that.

"We have done uncommonly well so far," said Jasper Leach.

"Ay, that we have," his father assented; "and we'll do much better in the East Wood."

"No doubt we will. That's the best place, and the keepers don't watch it, since they've never discovered any trace of us there. But I wish we were done and safely home. I'm still feeling uneasy."

"There's no reason to, lad. Don't worry. We're going to make a fine haul, and have the laugh on Joe Lurcomb, and put silver in our pockets."

They went on and on, occasionally adding to the contents of the sack; and, at length, when they had emerged from a tangled spinney on to a strip of open ground, they saw immediately in front of them the black, towering mass of the East Wood, which was a large plantation of fir-trees situated near the middle of the estate, and within about half a mile of the Hall. A number of snares had been set here, and it was certain that some of them would not be empty.

"Here we are!" murmured Ben Leach. "In another half-hour we'll be on our way back to——"

"Hold on!" interrupted the son, in a low, startled voice. "I thought I heard a twig snap in the spinney behind us."

"I didn't hear anything."

"I am pretty sure that I did, father. Lurcomb may be shadowing us."

"Nonsense! If there is anyone there it will be young Kildare; but he won't molest us, and what he does is none of our business. It can't be a keeper; for Ruff knows the

scent of them, and he would warn us if there was one within a hundred yards."

"The dog ain't always to be depended on."

"It is all right, lad! Come along!"

As the old poacher spoke he glided forward, and his son reluctantly followed him. Swiftly and warily they stole into the borders of the East Wood, with the lurcher at their heels, and the dark foliage swallowed them from view. All was quiet. Not a sound could be heard. A man was making his way out of the spinney which the two poachers had just left, but he was not moving in the direction they had taken.

* * * * * *

After a long day in the open air, spent mostly in tramping about, the members of the house-party at Malloway Hall were, naturally, not disposed to sit up late. Drake Pentland, having disappeared, as has been stated, Sir Malcolm Herbert shortly followed him, in order to escape from Professor Platinum, who had got the Government secretary into a corner, and tried to draw him into a scientific discussion; and Mr. Bedford-Parke, who had innocently led Miss Linda Ormsdale to the conservatory, had been found there by his wife, and marched off to bed by the ear.

Enraged beyond control, Joe Lurcomb thrust his daughter aside and sprang at the young man, and dealt him a blow that stretched him on his back.

Until eleven o'clock the others amused themselves in various ways, some chatting by the fire, while others played billiards; and then, by general consent, the company broke up and withdrew, Alphonse and Gaston kissing their hands to Lady Augusta Towers as she tripped up the staircase ahead of them.

Half an hour later the servants, having made all secure, not a light was burning anywhere in the house. From the grounds, however—had anyone been prowling about—there might have been seen, outside of a French window on the first floor, a faint, red glow; and that glow came from the tip of a lighted cigar that was between the teeth of Sexton Blake, who, his drowsiness having left him by the time he had got upstairs, had written a couple of short letters by candle-light, extinguished the candle, and stepped out upon a balcony to which the aforesaid window of his bed-chamber gave access.

It was no more than an idle impulse, a desire to fill his lungs with fresh air, that had brought him out here. The weather had turned milder since morning, and it was a calm, breathless night. It was also a dark one, for there was no moon, and the stars were masked by a grey mist, such as is common in the autumn.

When the detective had stood there for some time, enjoying his cigar, there floated to his ears a muffled sound that he knew to be the report of a gun. He listened for several minutes, hearing nothing more; and then, as he was about to withdraw, his name was uttered, and a hand tapped him on the arm.

Tinker had come out to the balcony, accompanied by the bloodhound, Pedro, who had attached himself to his young master, after the dispersal of the guests, because he preferred the rug in the lad's chamber to the one in the detective's room.

"I thought you were in bed and asleep," Blake said, in surprise.

"No; I hadn't even undressed," Tinker replied. "I have been looking out of the window. Your door wasn't locked, so I came in."

"And what for?"

"To ask if you heard that gun-shot."

"Yes, I heard it."

"And what do you suppose it meant, guv'nor?"

"Poaching, no doubt. I dare say young Kildare is abroad, and has bagged a pheasant."

"What is the matter with your wits?" said the lad, in a tone of good-natured contempt. "I know something about poachers and their ways. They only use a gun when there is bright moonlight and they can see to shoot the pheasants that roost in the boughs of the trees. But there is no moon to-night, so that shot wasn't fired at a pheasant. Either one of the keepers discharged his gun at a poacher, or it was the other way around."

"I never thought of that, my boy," Blake told him. "The fact that you have mentioned slipped my mind, though I was aware of it. Your deduction is a shrewd one. You have roused my apprehensions, and I am beginning to fear that——"

"Hark, guv'nor! What is that?"

"I hear something. Listen!"

The silence had again been disturbed. From a distance, beyond the park, there rang a husky shout, and then a noise like footsteps clattering on a hard road. The sounds faded, and all was quiet once more.

Pedro whined, and Tinker and the detective looked at each other.

"You were right," said Blake. "An alarm has been raised. I am afraid that somebody has been shot."

"It must mean that!" declared the lad. "What shall we do?"

"We had better investigate at once."

"Come along, then! I am ready, guv'nor!"

They left the balcony, and a few seconds later, each having put on his cap, they were stealing very softly downstairs, that they might not disturb the sleeping guests. They unlocked the front door, and let themselves out of the house, with the dog at their heels; and when they had descended the terrace, and gone a short distance beyond it, they heard footsteps behind them.

"Wait for me, please!" a voice called.

It was the voice of Drake Pentland, who rapidly caught up with the two, pulling on his jacket as he came. He briefly

explained that, while lying awake, he had heard the report of the gun and the subsequent sounds.

"I dressed as quickly as I could," he continued, "and hurried down. And as soon as I opened the door I saw you and Tinker ahead of me, and guessed where you were going. I hope nobody has been hurt!"

"I hope not," Blake replied; "but I fear that somebody has been."

"And with good reason. The shout we heard means, I imagine, that one of the keepers has been shot by a poacher."

"I agreed with you, Pentland."

"I have been expecting it!" hotly declared the squire's nephew. "It was bound to happen some day. Old Leach and his son are desperate fellows, and they have probably been out to-night. And young Kildare as well."

"I don't think he would shoot at anybody. He appeared to me to be a harmless sort of a chap."

"There is no telling what a man will do when he is cornered, Blake. It has just occurred to me, by the way, that if one of the keepers has been shot, your dog may be of assistance."

"I doubt it," replied Sexton Blake. "We have had so long a spell of dry weather that I don't believe Pedro would be able to find or follow a scent."

"I am sorry to hear that," said Drake Pentland, though an expression of relief, invisible in the gloom, crossed his face as he spoke. "We had better go towards the East Wood," he added. "The shot seemed to come from there."

"It was in that direction, at all events," the detective answered.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

The Murder—Denounced—What the Constable Found.

DURING the conversation the little group had been moving rapidly, and when they had got to the edge of the home park, at the point where the gravelled drive passed out of a gateway to a road that traversed one side of the estate, they bore to the left and quickened their speed. They could hear nothing, and the silence tended to lessen their apprehensions.

They ran on as fast as they could, however, over open ground and through covert and spinney; and at length, when they had reached the verge of the East Wood, a sound of voices was borne indistinctly to their ears.

"Listen!" said Tinker. "Somebody is in there!"

"I shouldn't wonder if the keepers had caught a poacher," suggested Drake Pentland. And as he spoke a look of disappointment, which his companions could not see, flitted across his features.

"Come along!" bade the detective. "We must find out what this means."

The next instant they had dived into the wood, and were groping through fern and bracken, in the black shadow of the overhanging trees. For two or three hundred yards they held to an aimless course, and then, perceiving ahead of them a flickering glow of light, they pressed on faster, and soon emerged in a small glade.

And here they paused, struck dumb by the scene that met their eyes. Their worst fears had been confirmed.

In the middle of the open space stood two men—the one a young under-keeper, named Jimpson; while the other, who had a lantern in his hand, was the local policeman, Constable Spink. And stretched at their feet, lying prone on his back, was Joe Lurcomb, the head-keeper, with a gun by his side. His eyes were closed, his features were of an ashen colour, and one hand was locked around the barrel of his weapon. The front of his velveteen jacket, over his left breast, was stained with blood and riddled with holes, from which red drops were oozing slowly.

"By heavens!" gasped Sexton Blake, breaking the silence. "Is he dead?"

"Quite dead, sir!" hoarsely declared the young keeper. "He has been foully murdered."

"I am glad that you are here, Mr. Blake," put in Constable Spink, who was aware of the detective's identity. "Your help will be valuable, if you will give it."

"Poor Lurcomb!" exclaimed Drake Pentland. "What a shock this will be to my uncle!"

"It is a terrible thing!" said Blake. "I was afraid that somebody had been hurt; but I was not prepared for this. What do you know about it, Jimpson?"

"Almost nothing at all, sir," replied the keeper, who was greatly agitated. "I had been to the village, and as I was walking back, and was near to the East Wood, I heard the shot, and hurried on. Then somebody called to me, and it turned out to be Spink; and when we had pushed into the wood, and searched for a bit, we stumbled on Lurcomb lying just as you see him now. He had been shot through the heart, and I'll swear it was done by old Ben Leach or by young Jasper."

"Did you see either of them?"

"No, sir, I didn't. I haven't seen or heard anybody."

"Have you, Spink?" inquired the detective.

The constable shook his head.

"I haven't laid eyes on a living soul to-night," he answered, "not until I fell in with Jimpson."

For a few seconds no one spoke. On the shuddering silence quavered a doleful wail from Pedro, who had recognised death. A sense of burning rage had gripped Sexton Blake, and the squire's nephew was very pale.

"There can be no doubt," he said, "that a poacher has killed poor Lurcomb."

"And before he had a chance to fire himself," muttered Jimpson. "He must have been taken by surprise."

"This has not been discharged," said Blake, as he drew the gun from the dead man's grasp and examined it. "Both barrels are loaded. We will see what the hound can do," he went on; "but I am not at all hopeful. The ground is literally parched, for one thing. And it was through this very part of the wood, I remember, that we all tramped before luncheon this morning, when we were moving to another position."

Pedro did his best, but without avail. Either because the dry soil and herbage retained no scent, or because so many people had gone by, the sagacious animal failed to accomplish what was wanted of him. He roved here and there for a time in a widening radius, sniffing eagerly; and then, with a low whimper, he crouched at his master's feet and looked up at him.

"It is no use," said Tinker.

"I thought not," Blake replied. "There is nothing more to be done here, so we will take the body home, and break the news to poor Miss Lurcomb, who is doubtless in bed and asleep. But you had better stop behind, Spink, and make a thorough search of the vicinity by the light of your lantern."

"That's not a bad idea," vowed Drake Pentland. "The murderer may have dropped something that would afford a clue to his identity."

"If he has I'll find it!" vowed the constable. "Trust me for that, sir!"

Shortly afterwards, when Constable Spink had begun to search, Tinker and the detective, assisted by the squire's nephew, were carrying the corpse of the head-keeper through the East Wood; they were in darkness, but Jimpson led the way unerringly, and they followed his guidance.

They had not far to go, a tramp of a little more than a quarter of a mile bringing the sad procession to Joe Lurcomb's ivy-covered cottage. They quietly entered the cosy apartment that served as living and sitting-room, and was lighted by a lamp that was burning dimly on a shelf; and when the body had been placed on a couch, and Blake was looking for something to throw over it, the stair door at one side of the fireplace was thrown open, and Bessie Lurcomb appeared.

With her snowy nightrobe trailing to her bare feet, and her luxuriant hair drooping around her face and over her shoulders, she was a lovely, angelic picture of rustic maidenhood. Her eyes quickly swept the scene, and the next instant, before they could stop her, she had darted to the couch, and was kneeling by it.

"My father!" she cried. "Oh, my father! They have murdered him!"

"Poor child!" the detective said to himself. "What a loss for her!"

Her grief was terrible to witness, and deeply affecting to Blake and his companions, who were powerless to comfort her. Shriek after shriek, vibrant with an intensity of suffering, burst from the girl's lips as she knelt there with clasped hands, tears streaming down her cheeks, her slim form quivering with anguish. At length, exhausted by the force of her emotion, her cries ceased, and her voice sank low.

"My dear father!" she moaned. "Dead—dead! Never to hear your voice again! How can I bear it? Why did you go? If only I had prevented you! Oh, how could anyone have been so cruel as to send you to your death?"

"What is she talking about?" whispered Jimpson.

"It is mere raving," Drake Pentland answered. "She is wild with sorrow."

But Sexton Blake felt that there might be more than raving in what he had just heard. He stepped over to the gamekeeper's daughter, and touched her arm.

"You know who I am?" he said gently. "My heart aches for you, my poor child. You have, indeed, been sorely stricken. I can't bring the dead back to life, but I may be able to punish the man who has done this wicked thing. Try to calm yourself. I want you to tell me, if you can, what your words mean. Am I to understand that your father was called out to-night?"

"Yes, he was," the girl faltered, when she had controlled herself by a hard effort. "I am sure he was. I don't know much about it, for I was only half awake. I heard a noise like a pebble striking on glass, and then I heard my father, at the window of his bed-room, talking to a man outside, who said something about poachers being in the East Wood. That is all I can tell you. I was so drowsy that I fell asleep again; and when I awoke, and remembered what I had heard, I went into my father's room, and found that he was not there. Then I came downstairs, and—and—— Oh, what shall I do? What will become of me?"

"Don't give way, my child," Blake entreated. "I want to learn more. Who was the man that roused your father, and told him there were poachers in the wood?"

"I don't know, sir," Bessie Lurcomb replied. "His voice was strange and gruff. It was not familiar to me."

Her tears flowed faster; and again, as she bent over the still form on the couch, she yielded to frantic grief.

"This is a queer tale, Mr. Blake," said Jimpson, in a puzzled tone. "It was not I who brought the news of poachers; nor could it have been one of the other keepers, else he and Lurcomb would have gone to the East Wood together."

"It must have been one of the tenants on the estate," put in Drake Pentland, who seemed to be anxious to find an explanation. "He discovered poachers at work, and hastened to tell the head-keeper."

"Then why didn't he go along, so that he could help to catch the rascals?" said Jimpson. "Whoever the man was, it is against reason that he should not have accompanied poor Joe."

"That is true!" declared Sexton Blake. "There is certainly an element of mystery here, and it will have to be cleared up."

A brief pause followed; and then, as if moved by a sudden impulse, Bessie Lurcomb sprang to her feet and turned to the little group. Her hands were clenched convulsively, and her bosom was heaving. In her eyes was intense horror, and she was altered almost beyond recognition by the passion that was stamped on her beautiful, flushed face.

"I know who did this wicked thing!" she cried. "I won't spare him! I will have no mercy on him! I want him to hang—hang! I want him to suffer as he deserves! Dick Kildare is guilty! He had a bitter quarrel with my father, because he would not consent to our marriage. They had hot words; and when Dick was struck and knocked down, he said that father would be sorry for it—that he would pay him back for the blow! Yes, Dick must have done it. He is the murderer! Find him; arrest him; put him in prison! But—but he may be innocent! Oh, what have I said? What have I done? I don't mean it! I—I——"

The girl's voice choked, and the colour ebbed from her cheeks. She glanced in terror at the detective; and then, pressing her hands to her heart, she swayed against the couch, and slid to the floor in a swoon. And a moment later, before a word had been spoken, the door was thrown open, and into the room strode Constable Spink, holding a gun.

"I have it!" he exclaimed. "See what I have found! It was lying a hundred yards from where poor Lurcomb was shot, and it must have been dropped by the murderer in his flight!"

"Let me have a look at that," said the young keeper. "There is something familiar about it. Ah, I thought so! This weapon belongs to Dick Kildare. I have seen him carrying it on the public road and in old Sam Watson's fields, where he was allowed to shoot. The girl was right when she denounced Kildare. He is the man you want, Spink."

"So his evil ways have led him to murder at last!" remarked Drake Pentland, drawing a deep breath. "By Jove, this is awful!"

"It is queer that he should have left such a piece of evidence behind him," said Tinker, in a thoughtful tone.

"I reckon he tripped and fell, and the gun flew out of his hand," suggested the constable. "And then he either couldn't find it in the dark, or he lost his head and ran on."

Ominous looks were exchanged, and there was a brief interval of silence. Jimpson had raised Bessie Lurcomb from the floor; and while she lay in his arms, limp and unconscious, the lad tried to revive her by sprinkling water from a jug that he had fetched from the kitchen.

Blake had taken the gun from the table, and held it under his nose; and now, having thrust his handkerchief a short distance down the barrel, and drawn it out, he was scrutinising the deposit of powder grime that had adhered to it. There was an odd, tense expression on his face as he put the weapon down and quickly slipped the handkerchief into his pocket. He glanced at his companions, and concluded, to his satisfaction, that no one had observed what he had done.

"This is a very distressing affair," he said quietly, "but we must all do our duty in regard to it. I will carry the girl up to her bed, Jimpson, and you had better hurry home and bring your wife here. We will wait until you return."

And as he spoke he tenderly took Bessie Lurcomb from the arms of the under-keeper.

Three-quarters of an hour later there were only two persons in the cottage, with the exception of the murdered gamekeeper. Jimpson's young wife was with the grief-stricken girl, doing what she could to comfort her; and Jimpson himself, with Constable Spink and Blake, was on his way to the rural police-station that was on the edge of the village of Carlton Royal, and was also the residence of the superintendent.

The constable had the fatal gun, which, if Jimpson was to be believed—and he was positive in his assertions—was the property of Dick Kildare. Drake Pentland had offered to accompany the little party, but the detective had told him that he would not be needed, and had sent both him and Tinker back to the Hall, with instructions to keep the murder from the knowledge of the guests for the present.

It was now several hours past midnight, and some time later, when the grey dawn was breaking, and the inmates of Malloway Hall were still asleep, Sexton Blake came alone across the park at a brisk stride. He did not approach the front door, however; nor had he any intention of entering the house. His object was a shrewd one, and his actions were curious. He slipped around one corner of the terrace, and glided on until he was under the window of Drake Pentland's bedchamber, the wall beneath which was clothed with a thick, tenacious growth of ivy.

For at least five minutes the detective stood here, pulling the mass of ivy apart, peering into it, keenly examining the tough roots and the leaves; and then, with a glint of triumph in his steel-blue eyes, he moved away as furtively as he had come, and retraced his steps in the direction of the village.

"I am satisfied on one point, at all events," he said to himself. "I know what course I shall take. It will be the wiser plan, under the circumstances!"

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.
Dick Kildare—The Arrest—Bessie Lurcomb Arrives.

AS has been stated before, the cosy little abode known as Hollyhock Cottage—it was so called from the profusion of flowers of that variety which grew in the garden—was just beyond the borders of Squire Malloway's land. It was two miles from the village of Carlton Royal, and stood in a shady lane that was very little used.

Here, three years ago, had died William Kildare, the reserved, rather eccentric gentleman who had come to the neighbourhood as a stranger, and had made no acquaintances. Here Dick Kildare had led a lonely existence ever since, subsisting on a very small income; and here, between six and seven o'clock on the morning after the tragic discovery in the East Wood, that young man was awakened by the noisy twittering of birds in the trees outside his window.

He opened his eyes and yawned, and, after lying still for a few moments in dreamy thought—he had had much to think of during the past day or so—he tumbled out of bed, and, with his clothes tucked under his arm, went down the cramped staircase, and thence to a small outhouse adjoining the kitchen, where awaited him a tub of cold water that had been filled from the well the night before.

Having enjoyed a sponge bath, and got into his garments, Dick Kildare's next move was in the direction of breakfast, which he prepared with a skill born of long experience. The table in the sitting-room, which contained a couple of shelves of books and some old-fashioned engravings, presently held toast and bread-and-butter, a coffee-pot, and three rashers of bacon; and when the young hermit had finished this frugal meal, and had filled and lit his pipe, he dropped into the corner of a well-worn couch, with a seriously meditative expression in his brown eyes.

"I feel as if I was another person altogether," he said to himself half aloud. "No more poaching, no more tramps with my gun, no more long afternoons lying on my back in the sunny woods. It is not easy to realise what that will mean. I am in dead earnest, though. I intend to reform, and I am going to do it. But how am I to get a start? That is the question. How am I to find the work that is to make a new man of me, and win Bessie for my wife some day? Farm work will be better than nothing at all, so I'll first try old Sam Watson, who has been a good friend to me in spite of my sins. If he hasn't anything for me to do, I suppose I'll have to go to Midchester, the nearest town, where I may be able to get employment of a higher grade. And there is another thing that has occurred to me.

"Mr. Sexton Blake, the famous detective, who has taken Malloway Hall for the shooting, is said to be a charitable and kind-hearted man. I have heard that he has given a helping hand to many a poor chap, and he looks as if he was that kind. I wonder if I could muster up courage enough to tell him my story, and ask him for his advice?"

Dick Kildare paused, and drew hard on his pipe, his brow knitted in perplexity.

"I want work," he went on, "but I don't want to leave the neighbourhood if I can help it. It would be a dreary life if I couldn't see Bessie once in a while, and tell her how I was doing. Writing to her wouldn't be the same thing. My own sweet little girl! What a treasure her love is! And how unworthy of it I am! I feel hot with shame when I think of what I might have made of myself months ago, instead of——"

The young man paused again, listening in surprise to the sound of footsteps on the gravel path of the front garden; and the next instant, before he could rise, the door was thrown open, and into the room stepped Superintendent Sandford, followed by Constable Spink and Sexton Blake.

"Good-morning!" the superintendent said curtly.

"Good-morning, sir!" Dick Kildare answered.

With increasing amazement, with an uneasy flush on his face, he glanced from one to another of the three men.

"I dare say you are aware of the tragedy that has happened?" Superintendent Sandford continued.

"I have heard nothing!" the young man exclaimed. "What do you mean?"

"Joe Lurcomb was murdered last night."

"Murdered? Joe Lurcomb? It can't be possible!"

"It is quite true. A charge of shot was fired into his heart, in the East Wood. He was found dead there by Constable Spink and Harry Jimpson."

"By heavens, how awful! Poor Bessie! What a grief for her! But what has brought you here, Mr. Sandford? Surely you don't suppose that I know anything about this wicked thing? I haven't got a very good reputation, I admit, but I would be the last person in the world to——"

"I'm sorry to tell you, Kildare, that there is strong suspicion against you."

"Against me? It is ridiculous! As if I would have killed Bessie's father! You have no grounds for accusing me of the crime!"

"I think I have," replied the superintendent. "It is known, for one thing, that you quarrelled with Lurcomb the day before yesterday, that he knocked you down, and that you threatened to pay him back for it. Moreover, a gun was found in the wood near the scene of the murder, and Jimpson has identified the weapon as belonging to you."

"That is false, sir," declared Dick Kildare. "You are wrong, and I can prove it. If you will let me——"

He had risen to his feet a moment before, and now, turning to the couch on which he had been sitting, he lifted the bed of it from the frame and peered under. At once he gave a start, and his cheeks paled as he looked at his companions.

"It should be there!" he gasped. "I always kept my gun in that place, and it was there yesterday morning, when I saw it last. And now it has disappeared. I—I don't understand it!"

"You knew that you wouldn't find the gun there," murmured Superintendent Sandford.

And he nodded to the constable, who, by a quick, deft movement, drew the young man's wrists together, and snapped a pair of steel bracelets upon them. There was a moment of silence. White to the lips, speechless with horror, Dick Kildare was staring at his fetters. Sexton Blake had all the time been watching him narrowly, but his features were inscrutable, giving no index to his thoughts.

"I arrest you on a charge of wilful murder," the superintendent said slowly and sternly, "and it is my duty to warn you that any statements you may make will be used in evidence against you."

"I am innocent!" the prisoner cried hoarsely, the horror in his eyes deepening as he realised his position. "I swear that I am innocent, Mr. Blake!" he went on. "Can't you see that I have spoken the truth? Won't you believe me? Please help me, sir! Appearances are against me, and it will take a clever man like you to get me out of this terrible scrape. I have very little money, but I will pay you some day!"

"I don't care to talk about the affair now," Sexton Blake told him, "but you may be sure that I will do what I can for you."

"Oh, thank you for that promise!"

"Enough of this!" interrupted the inspector, shrugging his shoulders. "I will leave you here, Spink, to make a careful search of this cottage. Now then, Kildare," he added, "I have a trap waiting yonder, and you must come along with me."

The young man and his captor went outside and climbed into the vehicle, which quickly drove away.

Constable Spink, standing in the doorway of the little cottage, muttered to himself:

"It is a sad thing! I am sorry for the lad, but there can't be any doubt that we have got the right man. And yet there was a queer sort of expression in Mr. Blake's eyes. I wonder what it meant?"

THE END.

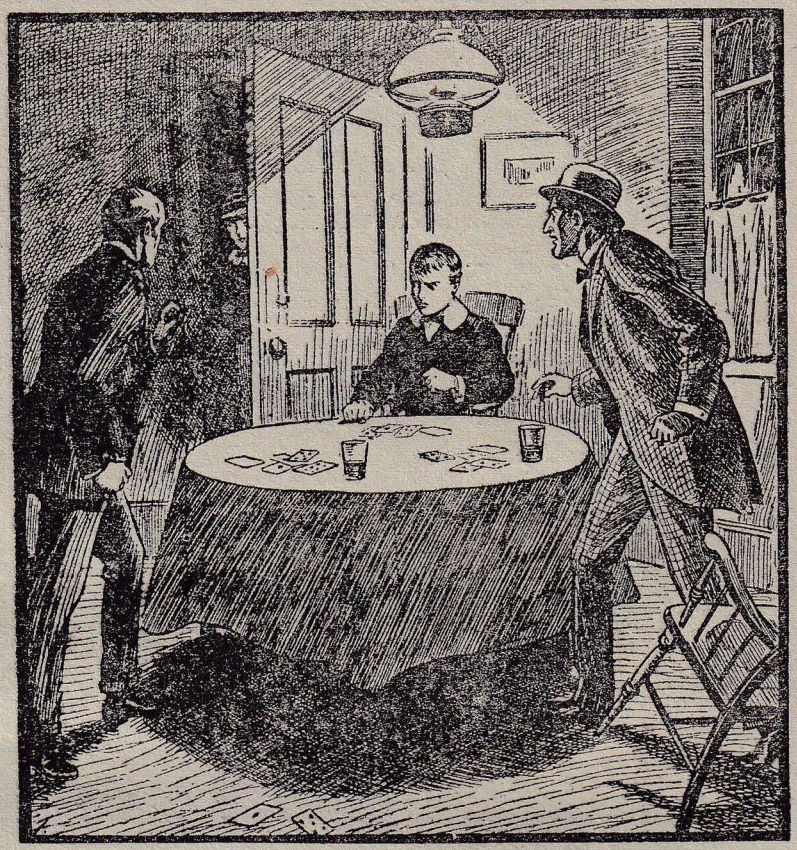
(What did that look in Sexton Blake's eyes mean? Don't fail to read next week's amazing story, entitled "His Cousin's Crime!" which forms a splendid sequel to this yarn. Make sure of securing your copy of next Friday's PENNY POPULAR *by ordering in advance.)*

STAUNCH TO A SENIOR!

A Magnificent Long Complete School Tale, dealing with the Early Adventures of TOM MERRY & CO. of St. Jim's.

- BY -

MARTIN CLIFFORD.



As Joe Frayne pushed the door open, the trio in the room seemed petrified. "Who—who's this?" exclaimed Mr. Joliffe harshly.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Where is Langton?

BUMP—bump!

Tom Merry paused in the Form-room passage in the School House at St. Jim's. He was passing the door of the Third Form-room, when the sounds of disturbance came to his ears from within.

Bump!

And, following the third bump, came a voice Tom Merry knew well—the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth Form.

"Ow! Weally, you young wascals——"

Tom Merry grinned.

"Gussy in trouble again!" he remarked cheerfully.

Manners and Lowther, Tom Merry's chums in the Shell Form, stopped too. The Terrible Three had just finished their preparation, and were coming down to the Common-room for a chat with the fellows before going to bed, when the sound of the bumping in the Third Form-room arrested them.

Monty Lowther looked at his watch.

"Quarter-past nine!" he said. "More than time the Third were in bed. It's bedtime in a quarter of an hour for our noble selves. What are those blessed fags doing up at this time of night?"

"Bumping Gussy, apparently."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Better give them a look-in!" said Manners. "Some giddy prefect ought to have seen them to bed a quarter of an hour ago. Perhaps Gussy has taken on the duty for him."

"Hence these tears!" grinned Lowther.

Tom Merry opened the door of the Form-room. Although it was a quarter of an hour past their bedtime, the Third Form were evidently not gone to bed. Two-thirds of the Form at least were there, and they were apparently in an unusually lively frame of mind. At St. Jim's bedtime for all Forms below the Fourth was at nine o'clock. The Fourth and the Shell went at half-past nine. The rule was generally strictly enforced, it being a prefect's duty to see that the juniors went up to their dormitories at the right time. But on this special evening it was clear that some prefect had forgotten the Third.

The Terrible Three looked into the Form-room. In the excitement there, they were unobserved for the moment. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form, was struggling vainly in the grasp of the fags. Chief among his assailants was his own minor, Wally D'Arcy, and Wally was ably backed up by Curly Gibson, and Fane, and Hobbs, and Joe Frayne, and a crowd more of inky-fingered youngsters.

"Give him another!" Wally was saying.

"Bai Jove!"

"Bump him!"

"Wally, you young wascal——"

"I'm sorry, Gussy!" said Wally solemnly. "This is a painful duty—painful to both of us. But, as your minor, I feel bound to bring you up in the way you should go. We can't have Fourth Form chaps coming into our Form-room jawing us! It wouldn't do! Give him one more!"

Bump!

"Ow! You young wascals——"

"Now, Gussy, are you going to be good?"

"Weally, you fwightful young wuffian!" gasped the swell of St. Jim's. "You awf'ly wuffianly young wascal!"

"Give him another!" roared Hobbs.

"Bump him!"

Bump!

"Yawo-oh!"

Bump!

"Ow! Wescue! Tom Mewwy! Wescue, deah boys! Ow!"

The Terrible Three could not resist that appeal. They rushed forward to drag the elegant Fourth-Former from the grasp of his tormentors. But the Third were not disposed to be robbed of their victim, neither would they dream of brooking the interference of Shell fellows in their Form-room.

"Go for 'em!" roared Wally. "Down with the Shell!"

"Sock it to 'em!"

"Hurray!"

In a second the Terrible Three were struggling with a crowd of fags. Tom Merry & Co. were great fighting-men in the Shell; but numbers were too great for them, and they went down under the onslaught of the fags. But they

did not go down unresisting. The combat was terrific, and the din was more terrific still; and it rang along the Form-room passage and over the whole School House.

In the wild excitement, no one heard the footsteps that came hurriedly along the passage. Kildare, of the Sixth, the captain of St. Jim's, stood in the doorway, his brows knitted, and his eyes gleaming with anger.

"Stop that row!" he shouted.

"Ow!" gasped Wally. "Kildare! Cave!"

The struggle ceased.

The Terrible Three and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy were sprawling on the floor, gasping; and the fags, with sheepish looks, backed away a little as the captain of St. Jim's strode into the room.

Kildare stared angrily at the heroes of the Third.

"What does all this row mean?" he exclaimed sharply.

"Ahem——" said Wally.

"Ahem——" said Curly Gibson.

"Bai Jove!"

Tom Merry & Co. scrambled up, looking very red and dusty. Kildare glanced at the clock in the Form-room.

"It is nearly half-past nine!" he exclaimed. "You should have been in bed half an hour ago, you fags! Why haven't you gone?"

"Well, you see——" began Wally cautiously.

"Whose duty was it to see lights out in your dormitory?"

"Langton's."

"Hasn't he been here after you?"

"No."

Kildare frowned. He was head prefect of the School House, and he never failed in his own duties, and had very little tolerance for fellows who did. Langton was known to be a very careless and happy-go-lucky fellow, but a fellow had no right to undertake a prefect's duties unless he was prepared to perform them. So Kildare considered, and his expression showed that he had some unpleasant things to say to Langton when he saw him.

"Well, cut off to bed now!" he exclaimed. "I'll see lights out for you. As it is Langton's fault, I shall not say anything to you about this."

Wally & Co. obediently marched off. Kildare was not to be argued with. They would as soon have thought of arguing with the Head of St. Jim's himself as with the captain of the school.

Kildare followed the Third out of the Form-room, and marshalled them upstairs like a flock of sheep.

The captain of St. Jim's saw lights out in the Third Form dormitory. He cautioned the fags before he left them that if there was any more noise they would hear from him. The Third Form knew Kildare, and they knew he was a fellow of his word, and there was not likely to be any more disturbance.

"My only Aunt Jane!" Wally ejaculated, when the dormitory was left in darkness. "Now I come to think of it, I wish we'd kicked Gussy out quietly instead of bumping him, and getting those Shell bounders in."

"It's all right," said Curly Gibson. "Langton will get a jaw from Kildare, but it really serves him right. Like his cheek to forget us!"

Wally chuckled.

"Yes, that's so, Curly. But I don't want to get Langton into a row, you see. He's a good-natured chap, and my belief is that Knox, of the Sixth, is getting him into rotten ways. If there's any trouble, Knox will get out of it all right. He's as deep as a fox, and Langy will get it in the neck."

"Langton's orl right," remarked Joe Frayne. "He 'elps me with my Latin, and he's took a lot of trouble over me."

"Taken, you ass!" said Hobbs.

"Thank you, 'Obbs!" said Frayne.

"Hobbs, you fathead; my name is spelt with an 'H'!" growled Hobbs.

Hobbs was friends with Joe Frayne now, but he had never quite got over his horror of Joe's peculiar English.

"Orl right!" murmured Joe.

"Oh, shut up, Hobby!" said Wally. "Don't be so blessed aristocratic! You'll have to chuck it, you know, when you go home to the public-house!"

"My father doesn't keep a public-house!" roared Hobbs.

"Well, the coffee-house, then."

"Look here, Wally——"

"It's orl right, Master Wally," said Joe Frayne. "I don't mind Master 'Obbs tellin' me. It's orl right."

The fags fell to discussing the matter of Langton's absence.

"Where the dickens can Langton be?" Hobbs said thoughtfully. "Of course, he's gone out."

"Without permission," remarked Fane.

"Prefects don't require permission to go out," said Wally.

"But they're not allowed out at this time of night. Even the captain of the school would have to explain."

"That's true."

"Oh, it's Knox at the bottom of it!" said Curly Gibson. "Knox is a blackguard, if ever there was one! You know the row Wally had with him for refusing to smuggle in tobacco?"

"Yes, rather," said Wally; "and the beast is still up against me!"

"They've gone down to the Green Man, as sure as a gun," yawned Hobbs. "Knox has friends there, I know—Joliffe, and Banks, the bookmaker. Langton has plenty of money, and Knox has taken him in."

"I shouldn't wonder."

"Kildare will come down on him heavy!" chuckled Curly. "I shouldn't wonder if he comes in squiffy."

The fags laughed at the prospect. But Joe Frayne did not laugh. He had seen too many people "squiffy" in his days in the London slums to regard it in a humorous light. The curse of drink had been too clearly brought home to his knowledge for him ever to think of laughing at it as less experienced lads might.

"Do you really think Langy is at the Green Man, 'Obbs?" he asked.

"I think it's most likely."

"'Orrid, ain't it?"

"Yes, 'orrid," said Hobbs sarcastically—"in fact, 'orrible! Not to say 'arrowing."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Joe Frayne dropped into silence. Although he had stopped saying "Crikey!" and "Strike me pink!" his aspirates still formed a great difficulty in his path; they were the pons asinorum that Joe could not clamber over.

The fags discussed the matter till they dropped off to sleep one by one. Their last sleepy remarks were to the effect that Kildare would "nail" Langton when he came in, and would bowl him out if he had been to the Green Man, and that Langton would lose his prefectship, and perhaps be sacked from the school. That thought was too troublesome to Joe to allow him to fall to sleep easily.

He remembered that Langton had helped him many a time with his Latin, which was terribly hard for Joe, and his Form-master, Mr. Selby, was very sharp and impatient with him about it. He remembered that Langton had chipped in and saved him when Sefton, of the Sixth, was licking him cruelly. Joe Frayne remained awake after all the other fellows had gone to sleep; and when the rest of the Third were buried in slumber, the little waif rose.

He dressed himself quietly, and stole to the door of the dormitory. The passage without was in darkness; all the junior Forms had been in bed long ago. Joe closed the dormitory door softly behind him, and stole away to the head of the stairs—and crouched there in the shadows—listening. Langton's fag was waiting for Langton to come in. And there was another fellow who was waiting, in a grimmer humour, for Langton to come in—Kildare, of the Sixth!

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
Caught!

KILDARE was sitting in his study, with the door wide open, and the light streaming out into the dusky passage.

It was half-past ten, and the rest of the Sixth had gone to bed. None of the studies showed a light with the exception of Kildare's.

Neither Knox nor Langton had come in yet.

But for the fact that it was Langton's duty to see the Third Form to bed and put their light out, and that the Third had stayed up, with considerable noise,

because Langton was out, Kildare would have known nothing of the prefect's absence.

Now, as he waited up in his study, he wondered grimly how many times this had occurred before.

Knox, he more than suspected, was a blackguard; but Knox was too cunning to be caught napping. But Langton he had always believed to be a decent fellow — weak and good-natured to a fault, but decent enough, and not at all the kind of fellow to keep bad company.

If he had an explanation to offer, Kildare was willing to hear it. If he had not, he would have to take the consequences.

No one could come along the Sixth Form passage now without Kildare seeing him. The clock in the tower of St. Jim's had rung out half-past ten, when there was a step in the passage, and Kildare listened. The step came along, and paused, as if the new-comer had seen the light streaming out from the open doorway of the study, and was struck by it. The captain of St. Jim's smiled grimly.

He rose to his feet, and his shadow fell into the passage as he moved between the light and the door. Then the footsteps came on again. The fellow in the passage had evidently realised that it was impossible to pass undiscovered, and that it was useless to retreat, since Kildare had heard him.

Joe Frayne, crouching in the shadow, with his heart beating hard, heard all that passed between Kildare and Knox, the black sheep of the Sixth. The little waif realised that, unless he could be warned in time, his benefactor would be trapped. How could he save Langton?

"Knox!" said Kildare quietly, as the figure of the senior came into view.

Knox stopped outside the door. His thin, vulpine face looked a little startled, but he had had time to recover his coolness, and he was quite ready for Kildare. He glanced into the study, and nodded coolly to the captain of St. Jim's.

"Hallo, Kildare!" he said genially. "Waiting up?"

"Yes."

"For me?" said Knox, with a smile.

"You and Langton?"

"Langton! Is he out?"

"Yes."

Knox yawned.

"By Jove, is he? I'm in a bit late myself. I was over at Wayland, you know, and I missed the train back. Awful bore, these rotten local trains!"

Kildare looked at him steadily.

"You've been to Wayland?" he asked.

The prefect nodded.

"Yes; it's market day there to-day, you know, and very lively."

"Did Langton go to Wayland with you?"

"He strolled down the road with me."

"But did not go to Wayland?"

"Really, Kildare, it sounds as if you were catechising me!" said Knox, with an unpleasant laugh. "Don't pile it on too thick, you know. I know you are the head prefect of the House, but I am a prefect, too, not a fag in the Second!"

"Did Langton go to Wayland with you?"

"Better ask Langton."

"Have you really been to Wayland?"

"Kildare!"

"I ask you that question because I can't take your word," said Kildare grimly. "Look here, Knox, it's no good beating about the bush. You remember Sleath, of the New House, who was expelled from St. Jim's for doing what I suspect you of doing? The Head has told me that he has reason to believe that that old connection between some of the seniors here and the rascals at the Green Man has not been broken off. He has asked me to look out and to report to him, as is my duty as captain of St. Jim's."

Knox sneered.

"It won't be much use telling tales about me!" he said. "I have been to Wayland, and I dare say I could find witnesses to prove it!"

"I dare say you could, whether you have been there or not!" said Kildare scornfully. "I know you know how to cover up your tracks, Knox, though I think you will come a cropper one of these days. Very well; you can go to bed, if you like. I shall stay up for Langton!"

"And nobble him as he comes in?" asked Knox unpleasantly.

"Yes."

"And take him by surprise, and make him blurt out something?" sneered the prefect. "You don't suppose Langton will be as much on his guard as I am?"

"I shall certainly ask him to account for staying out this evening, and leaving the Third up after bedtime," said Kildare quietly.

Knox started.

"The ass! Just like him to overlook something like that!" he ejaculated.

Kildare's lip curled.

"Yes; you wouldn't have forgotten," he said. "But you can get along; I'm going to stay up for Langton. And I'll trouble you to go into your study and close the door. You are not going to make any signal to Langton as he comes in. And I shall see that you don't drop out of the study window, either!"

Knox drew a deep, hissing breath, and his eyes glittered as he looked at the captain of the school. For a moment it looked as if he meant to defy Kildare, and to measure strength with him. Kildare thought so, too, and he clenched his hands and straightened up. He would not have been sorry. At that moment he would have been glad of a good excuse for knocking the black sheep of the Sixth headlong along the passage.

But if the thought was in Knox's mind, he dismissed it at once. He had either to defy Kildare, and face serious

trouble afterwards, or to abandon his companion in wrong-doing. Anybody who knew Knox would have known at once which alternative he would choose. He shrugged his shoulders with an assumption of carelessness.

"I'm going to bed," he said, with a yawn. "Good-night! You're welcome to sit up and do the Sister Ann bizney!"

He moved along the passage. Kildare did not return his good-night. He disliked the cad of the Sixth too much for civility just then. If Arthur Langton was in trouble, and had disgraced himself, as Kildare suspected, he suspected, too, that Knox was the one who had led him into rascally ways. And it would never be brought home to the cunning prefect; Knox was always too careful in covering up his tracks.

Knox returned in a few moments, and looked into the study again. He made a gesture along the passage.

"Langton's door is locked," he said.

"I know that," said Kildare.

"He may be in his room, asleep," suggested Knox.

Kildare shook his head.

"I have knocked and called him," he said. "If he were there he would answer me. And he was seen to go out with you, Knox, and no one has seen him come in. As a matter of fact, you know as well as I do that he is out of doors, and you know where he is!"

Knox shrugged his shoulders again, and walked up the passage. Langton's door was half-way up the passage, and Knox was nearer to Kildare's study. Kildare stepped into the passage, and saw the prefect go into his room, and heard the door close. A slight sound on the stairs caught Kildare's ear, and he glanced up past the banisters. But there was nothing to be seen, and the sound was not repeated.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Faith of a Fag.

JOE FRAYNE crouched in the shadows of the big staircase, his heart beating hard, his breath coming and going in quick throbs.

He had heard all that passed between Kildare and the blackguard of the Sixth, and he knew, even more surely than Kildare did, that Knox had lied—that he had left his companion in some questionable company, and it was pretty certain that it was in the back-parlour of the Green Man.

Joe Frayne knew where Langton was, and he knew that he would come in unsuspecting, and find Kildare waiting for him, and then the whole truth would come out.

Joe Frayne crept back to the dormitory passage, his face pale, his heart beating hard, his thoughts very busy.

How could he save Langton?

That was the thought that was hammering in his mind.

There was but one way. If the absent prefect could be warned, he might escape Kildare's keen eyes, or he would, at least, be prepared for the coming interview, and would not be taken by surprise and trapped into making dangerous admissions. And there was only one way to warn him—if someone should seek him where he was, and tell him that Kildare was waiting up and watching for him at St. Jim's.

Frayne trembled.

That meant breaking bounds! Tom Merry, his friend and protector, had impressed upon him often enough that he was to obey all the rules of the school—that he was never to violate any of them, and more especially such an important one as that about breaking bounds at night. And to go to the Green Man, the lowest public-house in Rylcombe!

It required only a few minutes for Frayne to make up his mind.

Gladly enough he would have asked the advice from Tom Merry, but the hero of the Shell was in bed and asleep, and Joe could not speak to him about the matter, either, without betraying Langton. And that was not to be thought of! If Langton of the Sixth had disgraced himself and brought himself within measurable distance of ruin, his miserable secret must be kept.

Joe Frayne stole silently along the dormitory passage, and reached the window at the lower end. It looked out upon an outhouse, and fags had used it many a time for leaving the house without permission. That was when some youthful "jape" made it necessary, but it was no jape that Frayne of the Third was engaged upon now. He realised very clearly how deadly serious the matter was, but he did not hesitate.

He opened the window silently and clambered out, and dropped softly upon the roof of the outhouse. In a minute more he was upon the ground, and was hurrying round the mass of dark buildings. The quarter to eleven had chimed out. Joe's great fear was that he might miss Langton, and that all his trouble would be for nothing. But as he halted in the shadowy quadrangle, and looked up at Kildare's window, he could see the stalwart figure of the captain of St. Jim's pacing to and fro in the light. Langton had evidently not returned yet.

Joe scuttled away to the school wall, and climbed the slanting oak, and a minute later dropped into the road.

Then he lost no time.

At a swift run, the little fag dashed away in the direction of Rylcombe.

The road was very lonely and very dark. There were few stars in the clouded sky, and only at long intervals a dim lamp shed a glimmer of light upon the shadowed road. Joe's hurried footsteps rang with startling clearness upon the hard road in the silence of the night.

The fag's heart was beating hard as he ran.

He might meet footpads on the road—such a thing had occurred to a St. Jim's fellow only a short time before—or——

Joe Frayne gave a gasp of terror as a dark figure detached itself from the shadows of the trees, and the light of a bullseye lantern gleamed upon him.

It was not a footpad, but it was worse, from Joe's point of view. It was Mr. Crump, the policeman of Rylcombe. The glare of the bullseye lantern fell full upon the fag, and the constable uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Hallo! Stop!"

A heavy hand dropped upon Joe's shoulder, but the fag, hardly knowing what he did, dashed it aside, and dodged the portly constable, and dashed on at a frantic speed.

The policeman pursued him for a few paces, and then stopped. He might as well have chased a will-o'-the-wisp as the panting, fleet-footed junior of St. Jim's.

Frayne tore on, his heart in his mouth. The lantern-light and the heavy footsteps died away behind him. He was in no danger of being caught, but he knew that the village policeman must have recognised him as a St. Jim's fellow. Doubtless, in that brief instant Mr. Crump had not seen his face clearly, but he would know that he was a junior from the school. And Joe knew only too well that Mr. Crump would consider it his duty to report the incident to Dr. Holmes on the morrow. It was his duty, there was no doubt about that, for he must know, of course, that the boy was out of school at that hour without permission. There would be an inquiry, and—— Joe's heart sickened within him at the thought. What if it came out that he had been out of bounds?

He did not pause until he reached the dark lane that led along the side of the public-house to the gardens at the back, sloping down to the river.

The fag turned into the path beside the house, and skirted round the building, and reached the gardens. At the back of the house was a wooden veranda, with French windows opening upon it—curtained windows, from which a light shone, and upon which the shadows of figures could be seen. Across one window fell clearly the dark shadow of a man engaged in pouring liquor from a bottle into a glass.

Joe hesitated a moment, and then firmly ascended the steps of the veranda and stopped outside the French window. A murmur of voices came from within. Joe knocked at the door.

In the silence the knock was loud and startling. The voices in the room died away instantly. Joe pushed the door open and entered.

There were three persons in the room—two men and a boy. The men were Mr. Joliffe, the landlord of the Green Man, and Mr. Banks, the bookmaker and racing tout. The boy was Arthur Langton of the Sixth Form of St. Jim's.

The trio seemed petrified as the breathless fag, panting for breath, stepped into the room.

Mr. Joliffe was the first to spring to his feet.

"Who—who's this?" he exclaimed harshly.

Joe Frayne did not reply. He could not for the moment. He was exhausted with running, and the scene that his eyes beheld in the back parlour of the Green Man almost stunned him. He had feared the worst for Langton, but his imagination had not painted anything so bad as the reality.

There were cards on the table, and money, and ash-trays, and glasses. A glass that evidently contained something stronger than water was before Arthur Langton, and he held a cigarette between his fingers. His face was flushed, not only with the heat of the close and stuffy room. His eyes

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were heavy and strained, and his mouth strangely set. The cards dropped from his fingers as he looked at Frayne, and the cigarette fell to the floor.

"Frayne!" he muttered. "What are you doing here?"

"Friend of yours, Langton?" asked Mr. Banks.

"My fag at the school."

"Master Langton!" gasped Joe. "I—I——"

The prefect rose to his feet. His face was more deeply flushed now, and his eyes were gleaming with rage.

"You little hound!" he muttered thickly. "You cur! So you have come here spying on me!"

"Master Langton, I——"

Frayne had no chance to say more. The angry Sixth-Former rushed upon him and grasped him by the collar.

"You spying hound!" he shouted.

"So he's come here to spy, has he?" said Mr. Joliffe, with an unpleasant look. "You will 'ave to stop his mouth somehow, Langton!"

"I ain't!" panted Joe. "I've come 'ere to 'elp you—to warn you!"

"What's that?" demanded Langton sharply.

"Master Kildare's waitin' up watchin' for you, sir!" panted Joe. "I slipped out to come and tell you, so you wouldn't be caught goin' 'ome!"

"Oh!"

"My 'at!" said Mr. Joliffe. "That's a 'orse of another colour. Is the young villain telling the truth, do you think, Langton?"

Langton staggered to the wall, his face white and scared.

"Kildare waiting up for me?" he panted.

"Yes, Master Langton."

"How do you know? Why should he wait up?"

"You forgot about the Third——"

"The Third?" repeated Langton. "Oh, I remember! And——"

Frayne explained hastily.

"Good heavens!" muttered Langton. "I'm ruined!"

"There's a chance!" said Joe. "I 'eard Knox say as your study door was locked——"

"Yes; I locked it before I came out, so that if I was missed the fellows would think I had gone to bed," muttered Langton. "I forgot about the Third."

"If you was to get into the room somehow, Master Langton, they couldn't prove as you wasn't there all the time," said Joe eagerly.

Langton started.

"But—but if Kildare is watching——"

"He's watching the Sixth-Form passage for you to come along the usual way," said Frayne hurriedly. "If you was to get in at the back window—same way as I got out—you could come up the passage from the other end in your stockinged feet, unlock your door, and slip in, perhaps without Master Kildare's 'earing!"

Langton's eyes gleamed.

"By Jove! It's a chance!" Then his handsome face clouded over again. "But Kildare will hear—he's sure to hear!"

"Not if I stop him, sir."

"You? How can you prevent him?"

"I'll draw his attention to the quad, sir, by making a noise of some sort there, and while he's looking out of the window you can sneak into your study!"

"By Jove!"

Langton said no more. He put on his coat hurriedly, and his hat, and picked up his stick. He nodded good-night to the two scoundrels of the Green Man, and drew Joe out on the veranda.

"Frayne, old man, I'm sorry—sorry I treated you as I did when you came in," he muttered. "I—I didn't know. I'm sorry, kid!"

"That's all right, Master Langton. 'Urry up, now!"

Langton's step was unsteady as he went down the wooden steps into the garden. Frayne caught his arm and held him, and looked into his face anxiously.

"Squiffy, ain't you?" he muttered.

Langton gave a hard, miserable laugh.

"They made me drink," he muttered. "If it hadn't been for that—— But the fresh air will bring me round. I shall be all right soon!"

Joe led him down the path into the street. Save for the glimmer from the Green Man, the street was in darkness.

Joe seemed to have to do all the leading. Langton followed him like a child. Unfailingly the fag led him on till they came out into the road near St. Jim's, and the grey old walls rose dimly before them in the darkness.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
A Narrow Escape.

ELEVEN o'clock had struck, and Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, came to his study window and looked out into the dim, silent quadrangle. From only one window beside his own was a light streaming out—the window of the Head's study. He stood looking out into the dimness with knitted brows.

Langton had not yet returned.

What was to be done?

The captain of St. Jim's was now seriously alarmed. Surely the most reckless fellow could not intentionally have stayed out till midnight.

"I'll wait till twelve," Kildare muttered, "and then, if he isn't back, I'll speak to Mr. Railton! He will have to be searched for!"

It seemed a long time before twelve rang out on the stillness. But the deep boom of the hour came at last. Kildare listened to the twelve deep strokes as they came dully in at the window.

Midnight!

He quitted his study, and went to Mr. Railton's room. The Housemaster of the School House was long since in bed. Kildare knocked at his door, and after a moment or two the voice of Mr. Railton replied:

"Who is there?"

"It is I, sir—Kildare!"

"What is the matter, Kildare? Is anything wrong?"

"I am afraid so, sir! Can I speak to you?"

"Wait one moment!"

There was a sound of the Housemaster getting up. A light glimmered under the door. Mr. Railton, in dressing-gown and slippers, with a very startled look upon his face, opened the door, and met Kildare's glance.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"Langton is out, sir. I've waited up for him, and he hasn't come back. I'm afraid that something has happened to him."

Mr. Railton started.

"Langton out—at this hour!"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you sure, Kildare?"

"Quite sure, sir."

"That is extraordinary!" said Mr. Railton.

Kildare explained the circumstances quietly. Mr. Railton's brows grew very dark.

"There may have been an accident," he said. "But it is more likely—— But have you looked in his room?"

"No, sir; the door is locked!"

"May he not be gone to bed, then?"

Kildare shook his head.

"No, sir. Early in the evening I knocked and knocked, and there was no answer. It's pretty clear that he locked the door to give the impression that he was gone to bed. If it hadn't been for seeing the Third to bed, of course, I should never have missed him. It came out because he forgot about that."

"I understand. But, in order to make all sure, we will examine his room first."

"As you think best, sir."

Mr. Railton made his way to Langton's room, followed by Kildare. Kildare was quite certain that Langton was not there, and Mr. Railton had little expectation of finding him. But it was, of course, necessary to make quite certain of the fact before commencing a search.

Mr. Railton knocked sharply at the door, and tried the handle. The door was locked, and it did not open.

Mr. Railton knocked again, louder than before. There was a sound of a movement in the room, and Kildare started.

"Someone is in there," said the School House master.

Kildare looked amazed.

"I cannot understand this," he said.

Knock, knock!

"Are you there, Langton?" Mr. Railton called out sharply.

A sleepy voice replied:

"Hallo! What! Who's that?"

Kildare almost staggered. It was Langton's voice. Mr. Railton looked curiously at the captain of St. Jim's.

"He is there, Kildare!"

"Ye-e-es!" stammered Kildare. "I—I don't understand it!"

"Open the door, Langton!"

"Is anything wrong, sir?"

"Open the door!"

"Very well, sir!"

The key turned in the lock, and the door opened. Langton, in his pyjamas, stood there in the dark, only a glimmer of light from the passage falling into the study. The prefect rubbed his eyes, and stared at the Housemaster and the captain of the school.

Kildare was silent. He was so overcome with amazement that his voice had left him. He had kept watch and ward, and he hardly believed that Langton could have obtained entrance into the house without discovery. Even if he had climbed in at a back window, how had such a window come to be unfastened?—for Kildare knew that Knox had not quitted his room after entering it. But if Langton had been in bed all the time——

Mr. Railton struck a match, and lighted the gas. The prefect blinked in the light. He looked sleepy and a little flurried, as any fellow might have looked, at being awakened suddenly in the middle of the night.

"Is there anything wrong, sir?" he asked again.

"I wish to ask you a few questions, Langton. How long have you been in bed?"

"I don't know, sir. What's the time now?"

"Ten minutes past twelve."

"Must be nearly four hours, I should think."

"You went to bed early?"

"Yes, sir. I had a bad headache, and I thought I was catching a bit of a cold, and I meant to sleep it off. I have been reading rather hard lately."

"Had you forgotten that it was your duty to see lights out for the Third Form this evening, Langton?"

Langton started.

"By Jove, sir, I had! But I suppose one of the other prefects did it. I would have asked Kildare or Darrel if I'd thought of it. I suppose my beastly headache drove it out of my mind."

"Were you asleep when Kildare knocked at your door?"

"Did he knock?"

"Soon after half-past nine," said Kildare, speaking for the first time. "I knocked and knocked, and there was no answer!"

"I'm sorry!" said Langton. "I suppose I was fast asleep. As a matter of fact, I couldn't sleep when I went to bed, and my head was simply racking me, and I took a little draught. I had a sleeping-draught left over, sir, from the time I was ill last term, when Dr. Short ordered it for me. I took that to get off to sleep, and I suppose it made me sleep soundly. I certainly don't remember hearing any knocking at the door or waking up."

The prefect's manner was perfectly natural.

If he was not telling the truth, he was certainly a good actor, though with so much at stake he had every motive for doing his best in that line.

Mr. Railton looked at him searchingly.

He had always known Langton to be decent, and he could not suspect him of standing there telling a succession of lies without flinching at one of them.

The Housemaster turned to Kildare.

"It seems that you are mistaken, Kildare," he said. "I suppose you put faith in Langton's statement?"

Kildare nodded slowly.

"Yes, sir. I suppose it's as he says," he replied.

Kildare looked at Langton, reddening.

"I'm sorry, Langton," he said. "I suspected you of doing rotten things, and it seems that I was wrong. I don't quite understand all the matter, but I don't doubt your word. I shouldn't wonder if Knox purposely let me go on in error; it would be like him. But I'm sorry I thought badly of you; and I can say quite truly that it was a bad shock to me to think that you were doing anything rotten. I had always thought better of you than that. I'm sorry! I can't say more."

"Oh, it's all right!" said Langton. "Only don't jump to conclusions so quickly another time, Kildare, old man! It's jolly easy to be unjust!"

"Yes, I know that, and I'm sorry!"

"The matter is over now," said Mr. Railton. "I am only too glad that it has turned out so well, without a stain upon Langton's character. Good-night, my boys!"

"Good-night, sir!"

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

The Culprit.

THE next morning, that which Joe Frayne dreaded most happened. P.-c. Crump came up to the school, and was shown into the Head's study.

In less than a quarter of an hour Wally & Co., and one or two other fags of the Third, were summoned to Dr. Holmes' study. The fags entered very sheepishly, and at sight of P.-c. Crump, the Head and Mr. Railton, poor Joe shivered in his shoes. The game was up now with a vengeance, he thought.

"My boys," said Dr. Holmes, as the fags stood before him, with flushing faces and downcast eyes, "I have sent for you for a most important purpose. I have a question to put to you which you must answer frankly. One of you was out of bounds last night."

"Oh!"

It was a general murmur from the fags. They knew what was the matter now. Every eye turned involuntarily upon Joe Frayne, and Frayne flushed crimson.

Mr. Railton's eye met the Head's. They did not need to look much further from the culprit.

The Head's voice grew sterner as he went on.

"One of you left the Third Form dormitory, and left the school, and went to Rylcombe last night. P.-c. Crump has given me information."

Dead silence.

"I call upon the boy who was guilty of this conduct to step forward and own up to the truth," said the Head. "Mr. Crump is doubtful about identifying the boy. But if not otherwise discovered, I shall parade the Third Form before him, and ask him to pick out the boy. I think that in that case he will be able to resolve his doubts. And a most searching investigation will be made; it is impossible for the culprit to escape detection. I call upon him to speak up."

There was no reply.

Some of the boys were crimson and trembling now, from sheer nervousness lest suspicion might be turned upon them; and a detective, probably, would have found ample signs of guilt in half a dozen of them who were perfectly innocent. Frayne, however, had grown so pale and troubled that his state of mind could hardly have escaped notice, even if the masters' attention had not been already drawn to him.

"I shall now question you separately," said the Head. "Frayne, you will come first. Stand forward."

Frayne's limbs almost refused to obey him. But he dragged himself out from the ranks of the Third, and stood before the Head.

Dr. Holmes' glance ran over the faces of the fags. They did not mean to give Joe away, by any means; but their expression was quite enough to show the Head that he had found the culprit, and that they all knew it. The fags were not adepts at hiding their thoughts.

The doctor's glance grew very stern as it fixed upon Joe Frayne.

"Frayne!" he said, in his deep voice.

"Ye-e-essir," faltered Joe, his eyes on the floor.

"I am going to put to you a direct question, and beware how you answer it. Did you leave the Third Form dormitory in the School House last night?"

Frayne was silent.

"Poor old Joe!" murmured Wally. "It's all up! No good lying to the Head—and he can't lie for toffee, either! Poor old Joe!"

The silence in the study was oppressive.

Frayne seemed to be struggling for his words, but they would not come. His lips moved, but no sound was uttered.

"Come, Frayne," said the Head. "I am waiting for an answer to my question. Did you leave your dormitory last night?"

"Yes, sir."

Frayne's voice was almost a whisper.

"You did! You left the School House?"

"Yes, sir."

"You went to Rylcombe?"

"Yes, sir."

"You passed P.-c. Crump on the road?"

"Yes, sir."

"You were, then, the boy whom Mr. Crump saw, and whose absence from the school at a late hour last night he has reported to me?"

"Yes, sir."

Joe's words were barely audible now.

The fag seemed hardly able to speak. His eyes were on the floor; his face was pale as chalk; he felt the glance of the doctor burning upon his face, as it were, but he dared not meet it. Every reply was extracted from him, as it were, against his will; but he felt forced to answer. Of what use, indeed, was silence? His guilt was clear enough, whether he answered or not.

There was a brief pause. The fags were all looking sorry enough for Joe, but greatly relieved that their own ordeal was over. They pitied the culprit; but they were glad there was no chance now of the wrong fellow being picked upon.

"Now, Frayne," said the Head, "you have answered me frankly so far. You will now kindly tell me why you went to Rylcombe last night?"

Joe's tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. He might have known that that question would follow—in fact, he had known it, and that was a question he was not able to answer. He could not betray Langton. Whatever happened to himself, he could not betray his protector in the Sixth Form to disgrace and ruin! It needed only a word from him to bring the reckless prefect before the Head, to be condemned, expelled from St. Jim's, sent home with the brand of black disgrace upon him. Frayne knew that well! And he would never have spoken the word, if he had been tortured to utter it.

"Answer me, Frayne."

"I can't, sir."

The Head's look became very ominous.

"You cannot tell me why you went to Rylcombe last night?"

"No, sir."

Joe was silent.

"You went to some place, I suppose, Frayne?" asked Mr. Railton.

"Yes, sir."

"If it was a place of a harmless character, you will not suffer by telling Dr. Holmes. It will make matters better for you."

"Certainly," said the Head.

Frayne did not speak.

"Give Dr. Holmes the name of the place you went to, Frayne?"

No answer.

"Was it by any chance a public-house?"

Silence.

"Was it the Green Man?"

Joe started a little, but he did not speak. He had resolved to say no word, lest he should inadvertently betray Langton. His mind was in a whirl of dread and dismay, and he was afraid of what might pass his lips.

"You refuse to answer, Frayne?" said the Head at last.

Joe muttered something indistinctly.

"Speak up, Frayne."

"I—I can't tell you, sir."

"Why not?"

Silence.

"Very good!" said the Head, compressing his lips. "You are aware, Frayne, of course, that if you do not tell me where you went last night, I can only conclude that it was some place specially forbidden, and that you were engaged in disgraceful conduct that you dare not report to me."

"I—I wasn't, sir."

"Then why did you go, and where did you go?"

Silence.

"That senior boys of this school have sometimes been guilty of irregular conduct, I know," the Head went on gravely. "I have expelled a senior for it. That is bad enough, but that a junior should be guilty of such faults—and a junior, too, only in the Third Form—is extraordinary as well as disgraceful. I am ashamed that such a boy has ever entered the walls of this school. I feel that the blame is partly mine for having allowed such a boy to enter."

The Head's voice faltered a little. The fag stood silent, and Joe Frayne's face went very white.

He could hardly realise that these scornful, cutting words were addressed to him—words that cut and stung him like lashes upon the bare skin.

"I should have known," the Head continued, "that a boy trained, or, rather, allowed to grow up like a wild animal, as you have been, was not fit to enter a school like this. I should not have made the experiment. I can see now that it was a mistake, but I hoped that the influence of good and manly boys—boys like Tom Merry and D'Arcy—might make you understand what a decent life was, and give you a chance of taking a decent place in the world. Instead of making you good, it appears to have made you only hypocritical.

"You have made a good impression upon me—upon the masters—upon most of the boys, I think, and now suddenly I find that you have remained addicted to the worst habits of the slums—to late hours, to visiting public-houses, to gambling and drinking, for all I know—for why should you visit a low public-house at night, otherwise? I cannot excuse you by saying that you knew no better, for since your training at St. Jim's, you do know better. You have sinned with your eyes open. You have chosen the wrong path deliberately, knowing that you were disgracing yourself, and bringing your school to shame."

Frayne writhed.

"Oh, sir!"

"You will leave St. Jim's," said the Head, his voice rising a little. "If it were any other boy here, I should flog him, and expel him in public. I make allowance for the vices of your early training. I shall expel you from the school, but I shall make some attempt to save you from the life of vice and crime upon which you seem determined to enter. The gentleman who has befriended you, who pays your fees at this college, will be communicated with, and arrangements made for your future. The future that might have been yours you have sacrificed; but you will be given a chance elsewhere to learn a trade, and to grow up to be useful and honest, if you choose. But at St. Jim's you cannot remain. You are a disgrace to the school. Go!"

Joe tried to speak, but his lips were trembling, no words would come. He turned silently to the door, and left the study.

The rest of the fags filed out.

Dr. Holmes was left alone with the Housemaster. The Head's face was sombre.

"An experiment that has utterly failed, Mr. Railton," he said.

The Housemaster nodded, and slowly followed the fags from the study, and the Head of St. Jim's was left alone.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

At the Eleventh Hour.

THE news that Joe Frayne was to leave St. Jim's spread fast and furious. It came as a shock to Tom Merry. He sat in his study, a miserable look on his face.

But there was another fellow who felt worse about it than Tom Merry.

It was Langton of the Sixth.

His first thought had been for his own safety. But his safety was secured now, and he had leisure to think of other matters.

He had leisure to think of his conduct—of the baseness of letting the boy sacrifice himself—and he groaned in spirit over it. He paced his study in miserable thought. He knew that he ought to speak out and save Frayne. He knew that he would despise himself for ever if he did not.

But he did not—he dared not. He could not face it. If the alternative had been less terrible, he might have taken it. But to be expelled in shame and disgrace, to go home and face his people—he shuddered at the mere thought.

He could not do it.

He tried to think that, after all, it would not be so bad for Joe—perhaps the kid was tired of the restraints of a school. He had been born in the savage freedom of the slums, and might be glad to be free again. But in his heart Langton knew that he was trying to deceive himself with mere sophistry.

In his heart he knew how bitterly Frayne was feeling this disgrace—as bitterly as he would have felt it himself.

"Poor little beggar!" muttered Langton, again and again. "Poor little beggar! But he will have to stand it now."

Langton left his study at last.

There was a crowd of fellows in the big passage in the School House—some of them fellows from the New House. Both Houses of St. Jim's were keenly interested in this matter.

Langton observed the excitement, and he saw that Taggles, the school porter, was bringing a box downstairs.

Joe Frayne came downstairs after the porter.

The waif of St. Jim's walked with a firm step, though his face was very pale. He did not look in Arthur Langton's direction.

Langton's face went very white.

The boy was going. Outside, in the gloom, the station cab was waiting, and Taggles, the porter, was to take him to the station, and go with him to his destination—the destination which poor Joe had described as a "'ome."

Joe walked after Taggles to the door.

It was then that Arthur Langton's better nature, long held down in thrall by miserable selfishness and craven fear, rose to assert itself.

He sprang forward.

"Frayne!"

Joe turned involuntarily.

"Stop!" said Langton, white to the lips. "Stop! You sha'n't go!"

"Master Langton!"

"You sha'n't go, I tell you!"

"What do you mean, Langton?" demanded Kildare sharply. "Of course he will go! Are you off your rocker!"

"He sha'n't go!"

"Don't be an ass! Get out, Frayne!"

"Stop!"

Langton's voice rang out sharply. Joe hesitated. He saw Langton's meaning in his face, and he shivered.

"Don't, Master Langton!" he said appealingly. "Don't! I can't stand it. Don't!"

"I will—and must!"

"Don't say a word!"

"Hold your tongue, Joe!" Langton was calm and cool now, with the coolness of despair, but he was glad that he had spoken. It was better than the mental torture he had endured for hours. "Taggles, you can put that box down. Master Frayne is not going to leave St. Jim's."

Taggles set the box down in sheer amazement.

"Are you dotty, Langton?" asked half a dozen voices.

"No," said Langton. "Joe Frayne isn't going to leave St. Jim's. I know why he came to the Green Man last night, and I'm going to tell the Head. Frayne isn't going to be sacked from St. Jim's. I am!"

"You?"

"What——"

Mr. Railton came striding forward.

"What does this mean, Langton?" he asked sharply.

"When you came to my room last night, sir, you found me there," he said; "but when Kildare knocked earlier I was not there."

"What!"

"You lied, then?" said Kildare.

Langton nodded.

"Yes, I lied, like a coward as I was! I was at the Green Man!"

Joe gave a groan.

"'E's done it now!"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Mr. Railton, aghast. "Are you aware of what you are saying, Langton?"

"Yes, sir," said Langton steadily.

"You were at the Green Man?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you deceived us?"

"Yes, sir; I deceived you. I came in by the back way, and crept into my room and locked the door, and pretended to be asleep when you knocked. I should have come straight back, and been found out, only——"

"Only what?"

"Frayne came to the Green Man to warn me."

"Oh!"

"Good heavens!" muttered Tom Merry. "Joe—Joe, why didn't you tell me?"

"Frayne came to the Green Man to warn you?" repeated Mr. Railton, as if he could hardly believe his ears.

"Yes, sir," said Langton firmly. "Don't blame him for doing that. He knew I was in a horrible fix, and he's my fag, and he felt bound to do it. And—and the little chap thought he ought to do it because I've been kind to him at times. Poor little beggar!"

Mr. Railton looked steadily at Langton.

"You had better come in and see the Head," he said quietly. "Whatever your conduct has been, Langton, this action, at least, is a noble one, and you cannot be all bad. As for Frayne, I think I can undertake to say that the Head will pardon him—and certainly he will not be expelled. Come, Langton!"

The prefect, with bowed head, followed the Housemaster to Dr. Holmes' study.

Dr. Holmes heard what Mr. Railton had to tell him in amazement, and when the Housemaster had explained, the Head turned a very grave look upon Langton.

"You know what this confession means, Langton?" he said.

Langton nodded wretchedly.

"Yes, sir. I know I shall be expelled; but—but I couldn't see that kid sacked in my place. Will you get it over as soon as possible, sir? I feel as if I can't face the fellows again."

The Head was silent and very thoughtful.

"You spoke out like this simply to save Frayne, Langton?" he said.

"I had to, sir."

"Yes. Knowing what it meant to you?"

"I don't know that I stopped to think. I didn't mean to speak out, but I did it somehow."

"Because you were not so bad as you had supposed yourself to be, I think," said the Head gravely. "It is a great shock to me, Langton, to make this discovery regarding your conduct. Yet the way in which it has come to light reflects so much credit on you that I cannot help thinking there is much good in you. Were you led into this? Have you had an associate in these reckless actions?"

Langton was silent.

"I will not press that question," said the Head, kindly enough. "If I were to give you another chance——"

Langton gasped.

"Oh, sir!"

"Could I expect you to play the game, Langton—to have no connection with anything of the sort in the future?"

"Oh, sir! I had already resolved that it was all over, anyway. I have broken off with it after last night. The scare was enough for me. I had never realised clearly what it meant till then. Then——" He broke off.

"Very well," said the Head quietly, "I shall give you another chance, Langton. You will stay—nothing more shall be said about this—and I will trust you to keep your word."

Langton tried to speak, but he could not. He burst into tears.

* * * * * * * * * *

Langton did not leave St. Jim's, and Joe Frayne remained Langton's fag, and from that day no one was likely to think badly of the fag who had been so Staunch to a Senior!

THE END.

THE PERIL OF THE SEA!

A Magnificent Long, Complete Story dealing with the Great Adventures of

JACK, SAM, & PETE.

By S. CLARKE HOOK.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Jonathan and His Invention — The Steam Man's Peril.

THROUGH the very heart of the African forest the three comrades, Jack, Sam, and Pete, were making their way towards the west. Rory was with them, and Pete was trying to make him search for something.

"Now, look here, Rory," exclaimed Pete, shaking his head gravely at him, "dis mighty awful heat is quite galling enough, widout your fooling about as dough you did not understand my meaning! I don't want you to search for rabbits. I want you to search for de steam man, 'cos by dat steam man is a Yankee inventor named Jonathan Cyrus Cestor; and dat's de man we want to find. Now, just look at dat dog burrowing in dat hole, as dough a steam man and a Yankee inventor could get in dere! I dunno how you came to lose dose two, Sammy."

"I reckon it was your fault. You wanted to make a near cut back, and said you knew the direction."

"Dat may be, Sammy; and I tink we'm going in de right direction. Dey can't be far away now."

"Dere's someting wrong dis time!" cried Pete, as he darted past the huge crank that was lashing about.

"It seems to me if your steam man were anything like close, we should be able to smell him," said Jack. "I rather fancy you will find your short cut a long one, and that we shall have to go all the way back on our own trail."

"Golly! We ain't going to do anyting ob de sort frough dis mighty heat!" exclaimed Pete. "If Sammy had got an ordinary hunter's head instead ob a chunk ob putty on his shoulders, he would be able to find a riber in de first place, and de steam man and de Yankee in de second place. Ob course, de Yank is ob no particular value, 'cos dey neber are; but de steam man is, and I don't want to lose him."

"I advised you not to bring him," said Jack. "I knew the brute would be a fearful trouble travelling through the forest, and I was perfectly right."

"Well, I don't wonder at your boasting ob such an unusual occurrence as dat, Jack. All de same, we ain't lost eider ob dem, 'cos we know dey are in dis forest."

"Quite so!" laughed Jack. "The sailor's kettle was not lost, because he knew it was in the sea."

"But Jonathan ain't a kettle, Jack, and he ain't at de bottom ob de sea; and dat makes all de difference in life, as de undertaker said to de corpse dat was six inches too long for its coffin. But come dis way, and I will show you where de riber is. After dat we shall easily find de steam man, seeing dat he is on its banks. Do come along, Rory! If you don't stop searching for rabbits, I shall be mighty displeased wid you!"

Pete struggled on for about an hour through the dense bushes, and then Jack and Sam, who were a little way behind, were startled by hearing him howl out in the most extraordinary manner.

They both sprang forward, tearing themselves considerably with the brambles. But they did not heed that, fearing that their comrade was in deadly peril.

Leaping through the bushes, they suddenly came in sight of the river, and Pete standing on the bank, howling at the top of his voice.

"What's the matter?" gasped Jack.

"Nuffin, Jack. Only I'm glad."

"I reckon you wouldn't make much row if you were downright joyful!" growled Sam. "What do you mean by frightening us like that?"

"Yah, yah, yah! Neber tought my sweet little voice would frighten you! But don't you see, now we hab found de riber, it will be an easy matter to find Jonathan, seeing dat we know he's on de bank ob it. De question is, are we too high up, or are we too low down? Which do you tink, Sammy?"

"Too high up. What's your opinion, Jack?"

"The same as yours. If we follow the stream, we shall come upon Jonathan to a certainty. He can't be very far from this spot."

Jack was right, for they had not proceeded very far along the river-bank when they came in sight of a camp-fire beneath a large tree. The steam man was standing by it, and a weird-looking creature he appeared in the flickering glow of the firelight.

"Well, dis is a nice ting!" exclaimed Pete. "Here's de fire, and here's de steam man; de puzzle is to find Jonathan. I 'spect he has gone to look for us. Howeber, he will know his way back, and if we cook de supper, he is most bound to smell it. He's a man who likes his meals regularly and frequently."

"Well, I reckon it would be perfectly useless to search for him," said Sam. "The fire is nice and bright, so we will prepare a meal, and I dare say by the time it is ready he will be back."

Sam was wrong. He had cooked an ample supply of meat,

and as there were no signs of Jonathan, they commenced their meal without him.

"Dis meat ain't at all bad!" exclaimed Pete, taking a huge mouthful. "I was just—— Woohooh! Hi, golly! What's dis happening?"

There was a tearing sound amongst the branches of the tree, and the next moment Jonathan, yelling at the top of his voice, dropped into the centre of the camp-fire.

An indiarubber ball could scarcely have bounded out quicker than he did, and he went dancing about in a manner that was quite convincing that none of his limbs were broken, which was rather a curious fact, seeing the height he must have dropped from, although no doubt the branches broke his fall.

For some moments Pete gazed at the gesticulating man in silent amazement, then he burst into roars of laughter.

"Yah, yah, yah! Golly! You'm de funniest man I eber saw, Jonathan! Yah, yah, yah! You are, really! Must tink he was a grasshopper to come jumping into de fire like dat!"

"I climbed the tree to escape wild beasts, and went to sleep in the branches," said Jonathan.

"I see! You fell asleep, and den fell in de fire? Yah, yah, yah! 'Scuse me laughing at you, but stupidity always amuses me, and I do tink Yankees are de stupidest cattle on de face ob de earth! If a man was to ask me weder I would rader train a donkey or a Yankee, I should choose de donkey in preference to de Yankee. I would rader train a wild cat, or any ob dose silly beasts, dan a Yankee. Now, when are we going to reach your wonderful invention dat is going to revolutionise de world, and play up jinks ob dat sort?"

"We shall reach the spot this morning, if that brutal thing goes at any pace."

"You mean de steam man? Well, he will go at almost any pace you want. If you don't believe dat, you go first, and I will make him obertake you. You will know when he does dat, 'specially when I put his arms in motion!"

Jonathan led the way, but he appeared to have a very hazy notion as to how far they were from his wonderful invention, and he got tired and cross before they reached their destination; but at last they came to a part where the river broadened into a large lake.

"Waal, that's the spot!" exclaimed Jonathan. "The invention lies beneath those bushes in the water."

"Ain't you frightened dat invention will get wet?" inquired Pete, gazing about with a view to catching sight of it.

"It is meant to get wet, you silly nigger!" retorted Jonathan. "It is a submarine boat, but it is constructed on the most wonderful lines—in fact, I constructed it myself. This is a lagoon, and we are quite close to the sea. Waal, I want you to come aboard, and we will run out to sea. Then I will show you how that craft dives and dashes along. In fact, she can do any mortal thing. I've got a good supply of petrol aboard, and her motor is the most powerful in the world for its size. In fact, there is no other craft in the world to equal her. Her speed beneath the water is as great as on the surface, and that's about fifty miles an hour."

"Hab you eber tried her speed beneath de water, old hoss?" inquired Pete.

"No, I haven't; but I know what it will be like. We are going to try it now."

"Eh?"

"Jack and Sam are coming with me, and we are going to dive into the depths of the ocean. We shall run her down to the sea, and you can walk along the shore of the lake with your brutal steam man. You can't bring the thing aboard. It is not more than thirty miles to the sea."

"Golly! I don't seem to care for a thirty-mile walk after de little lot we hab already done."

"I can't help that. You will either have to walk with your steam man, or leave him where he is."

"Bery well! You start off, and I will take him along wid Rory. You needn't wait for me for your diving operations, 'cos somehow I don't seem to care to dive into de depths ob de sea, specially in a boat dat has neber been down before."

"She will go down all right."

"I don't doubt dat, old hoss. What I'm doubting is weder she will eber come up again. You see, if I am to be in dat boat, I would prefer her to come to de surface."

"Oh, get away, you miserable coward! Take your steam man to the shore, and we will meet you there. I am going to manœuvre the craft about this lake for a bit, so that you will reach the shore as soon as we shall."

Pete watched the comrades go aboard the submarine, and, whistling to Rory to follow him, he started his steam man, and made his way along the southern shore of the lake, while the little craft shot across the still waters in a manner that certainly did credit to Jonathan's inventive faculties.

Pete never doubted that Jonathan was clever enough as an inventor, but the worst of it was that he could not help boasting, and thus it was why Pete never lost an opportunity of chaffing him.

By the time Pete reached the shore it was dark, and as he had long since lost sight of the submarine, he determined to camp for the night.

The sun was well up before Pete awoke, and he looked across the sea in vain for the submarine.

"'Spect we must go round de angle ob de rocks, Rory!" exclaimed Pete. "What's de matter, boy? You don't seem easy in your mind. What's dat? De steam man? Well, he's as motionless as a painted ship upon a painted ocean, dough I must say he don't closely resemble it. Want me to make him start? Well, dere he goes. Hi, golly! What's all dis?"

Rory uttered a wild howl. Pete felt something cold and clammy fastening round him, and his first impression was that it was a boa-constrictor, though it was a funny place to find one.

Then he started the steam man's arms as well as his legs, and, exerting all his great strength, tore himself from that deadly embrace that was slowly coiling round him.

It was the tentacle of an enormous octopus. The hideous creature must have been hiding in a cleft in the rocks.

A second tentacle crept round the steam man's body, while Pete and Rory got to a safe distance. Then Pete watched the strangest scene he had ever seen in his life.

The steam man's strength was tremendous, and he was now working at full pressure, yet that hideous monster held the thing in its tightening grip, and as the swinging arms lashed into its pulpy flesh, another tentacle would slowly coil around the metal body, until seven were around it, and the eighth was clinging to the rocks with its suckers.

For some time Pete stood gazing at the awful-looking monster in silence. He could see its snakelike-looking eye which stood out from the shapeless brown body, quivering like a mass of jelly, and he shuddered to think of the awful fate of any human being getting within reach of those horrible tentacles lined with their suckers.

The strength of the creature was enormous. The steam man was drawing nearer and nearer in the deadly embrace, and then the swinging arms struck the octopus's pulpy body.

"Yah, yah, yah!" roared Pete. "I'm backing de steam man against de spider, after all!"

And Pete was right. The tentacles uncoiled, and using them as feet, the hideous monster scuttled round an angle of the rocks, and disappeared from Pete's view.

"You come dis way, Rory!" cried Pete, stopping his steam man. "Dat wild beast ob prey has gone north, so we'm going south, 'cos we hab got a particular appointment in dat direction. I ain't habing anyting to do wid insecks ob dat description. Now den, steam man, just you come dis way, 'cos you hab had enough fighting for one morning. Yah, yah, yah! I must say I'm glad dat you took my place in dat fight. Why, here comes Jack and Sammy wid de inventor! 'Spect dey will tink I'm anoder inventor when I tell dem what has happened."

"We have been looking for you everywhere!" exclaimed Jack, approaching along the shore.

"Well, you didn't look in de right place, Jack; and when you want to find anyting it makes all de difference in de world! Allow me to introduce you to St. George!"

"What have you named your steam man that for?" laughed Jack.

"Why, he's been fighting wid dragons, Jack! You neber saw such a fight in all your life!"

"Where are the dragons?"

"Dere was only one ob dem, but he was quite enough to go on wid. Golly! You neber saw such an awful-looking beast in all your life! I made sure he must be a Yankee at de start! You ain't got a twin-brudder knocking 'bout dis shore, hab you, Jonathan?"

"You silly idiot!" snarled Jonathan. "I don't suppose you have seen anything!"

"Den you'm quite wrong. Dat dragon came for me, and I referred him to de steam man. Golly! You should hab seen dose two fighting. I started de steam man's arms and legs going, and de dragon went for him sort ob slowly, but dere was a lot ob sureness 'bout it."

"What did your dragon look like, Pete?" inquired Jack, who felt perfectly certain that Pete had really seen something.

"Just as dough you had tacked four full-sized boa-constrictors, and tied dem togeder in deir centres, den shoved a pair ob eyes and a sort ob drain-pipe for a mouf in de central part ob his regions."

"Had it eight tentacles?"

"I didn't ask it dat! You see, we weren't on speaking terms!"

(Continued on page 22.)

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 210.

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PENNY POPULAR, Oct. 14th, 1916.

"I mean, eight feelers!"

"Den why don't you say so, Jack? If he had, he didn't show any signs ob dem. Should say dat dragon hadn't got any feelings at all, and it was a mighty good ting for de steam man dat he hadn't got any feelings, eider, else he would hab got hurt dat time, 'cos de dragon tried to squash him as flat as a pancake; but I tink he found St. George rader hot, and de way he swiped wid his arms and kicked wid his legs must hab been painful to de feelings ob de hardest-hearted dragon dat eber libed."

"How big was it?"

"Looked to me 'bout as big as a house. When he had had enough ob St. George, de dragon sort ob turned itself inside out, and using his mighty long arms as sort ob legs, went scuttling away like some old spider."

"Ha, ha, ha! It was an octopus!" declared Jack.

"I don't see de good ob de inseck."

"Well, the Indians hunt them in canoes, and eat them."

"Golly! I should prefer roast beef to dat pulpy-looking brown stuff."

"Well, suppose we come aboard the Firefly?" suggested Jack. "That is the name of Jonathan's submarine."

"It's a mighty wonder he didn't name it Jonathan Cyrus Cestor, and de rest ob it! Still, I tink his name ob Glow-worm is rader appropriate."

"Firefly, you silly idiot!" corrected Jonathan.

And Jack smiled, for he had an idea that Pete would call that vessel Glow-worm for the rest of time, seeing that it annoyed Jonathan.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Storm—Jack at Death's Door—Pete Risks His Life.

THE comrades went on board the submarine, and in less than half an hour the weather changed with tropical suddenness. Black storm-clouds floated across the heavens from the sea, and as the tide came in there was a heavy swell.

"We are going to have a terrific storm!" exclaimed Jonathan. "It will not be safe to put to sea."

"Then what do you purpose doing?" inquired Jack. "It will certainly not be safe to lie off the shore. Your vessel would be inevitably wrecked, and we should lose our lives in the bargain."

"We must run into the lake."

"Preposterous!" exclaimed Jack. "The storm will be upon us in a very short time. Hark! There is the thunder. Even in this swell we could not run up that narrow channel, and if I am not mistaken, in a very few minutes the sea will be lashed into foam. I tell you, Jonathan, there is only one thing to be done, and that is to stand out to sea, and chance the fury of the storm. It either means that or abandoning your vessel to her fate. It is for you to decide what you will do; but you have got to recollect that you will have to make your decision very promptly, otherwise it will be too late."

"What's de good ob asking de old hoss for his decision?" exclaimed Pete. "You might just as well ask a child if it would hab a beating or not for somting it has done wrong. You get to de engines, Jack, and I will get to de helm, den we will mighty soon settle de point. Sammy can argue de matter wid Jonathan, and see what he decides."

"I must think the matter over, and——"

"All right, old hoss!" exclaimed Pete. "You go into your cabin and tink it ober, and be sure to let us know your decision as soon as possible. Hurry up, Jack! De first order is easy ahead, and when you get her under way you can consider de second order is full speed ahead; only it will be as well to get de anchor up before you execute dat second order. Get out ob my way, Jonathan! You ain't de slightest use except as ballast, and you ain't much use for dat, because beyond de fourteen pounds your bones weigh, I don't 'spect we could add much more dan two-free pounds for de flesh on dem. Funny ting dat you ain't as fat as butter, considering de mighty amount dat you eat. Still, dat ain't got anyting to do wid de German Emperor, or de storm."

The Firefly was soon under way, and as she cut through the sea huge waves burst over her deck.

In the conning-tower, however, Sam and Pete were perfectly dry. All they had to fear was whether the Firefly would weather the storm, and Jack's one idea was to get well out from the shore ere it burst over them in its full fury.

That it was coming there could be no doubt. Heavy gusts of wind already swept on them, while the sea rose with great rapidity.

Then the thunder no longer rumbled in the distance, while fork and chain lightning played across the now black heavens.

"We'm in for it dis time, Sammy!" exclaimed Pete.

"I reckon so. It is to be hoped that Jonathan has built his boat strong enough to stand the storm. She seems to be going all right so far."

"M'yes! But den, you see, de storm is only just commencing. Dere's one ting to be said, if it gets too rough on de surface we can always go beneath it, and as he says dat we can remain dere six weeks, I should say de storm ought to hab passed away by dat time."

"There is no necessity for anything like that at present," said Sam. "We are getting along famously, and Jack has got the engines at full speed. My impression is that she would behave still better if we went at a slower pace."

"And my impression is dat dere's a mighty strong smell ob petrol 'bout dis craft. I tink I shall suggest to Jonathan dat he names her de Stormy Petrol instead ob de Glow-worm. I can easy paint de oder name on. Suppose you signal to Jack to ease de engines?"

Sam did so, but there was no response, and as the engines were not slackened, the comrades began to get somewhat anxious.

"Just you catch hold ob de wheel, Sammy, while I go below and see dat all is right!" exclaimed Pete, hurrying away.

As he entered the engine-room he was met with fumes so strong that he quickly stepped backwards; then he caught a glimpse of Jack lying senseless on the floor.

Pete sprang into the place, holding his breath. Jack was no light weight, and Pete was so affected by the noxious fumes that he reeled from side to side; but he grasped his comrade in his arms, and, raising him from the floor, bore him from the place.

"Go and look to the engines!" cried Jonathan, as Pete got his burden into the cabin.

"De engines can look to demselves, old hoss!" answered Pete. "I'm looking to Jack. Hallo, dere, Sammy! Come and help bring Jack round! Neber mind 'bout de steering!"

"You raving maniac, the vessel will be wrecked!" cried Jonathan. "I must go and stop the leak of petrol. I cannot steer."

"Can't help dat. I'll go and steer directly Jack is all right, but I ain't going till he is. What do you tink about de matter, Sammy?"

"Bathe his temples with water. We shall bring him round all right—at least, I trust so," added Sam, beneath his breath.

For quite a quarter of an hour Jack showed no signs of returning consciousness, and all that time the Firefly was dashing through the waves, and rolling in a truly alarming manner. Jonathan had stopped the leak, but he would not venture into the engine-room; and when he went to the wheel it became obvious that he did not understand much about steering a vessel.

Pete, however, refused to leave Jack until he regained consciousness, and then he took Jonathan's place at the wheel, having first made Sam promise not to leave Jack under any consideration.

Jonathan was endeavouring to induce Pete to go below and slow down the engines, when there was a terrific crash, followed by others that shook the little vessel from stem to stern.

"Golly! Dere's someting gone wrong dis time!" cried Pete, springing below, while Jonathan shouted out a lot of orders that were quite inaudible.

The place was still full of fumes, but as Pete peered in he saw at once where the peril lay.

Jonathan's machinery was of a most intricate description, and a large crank had broken away, and was lashing about in a manner that would have quickly smashed everything in the engine-room.

Sparks were flying in all directions as the terrific blows were dealt, and what Pete feared was that one of those blows would go through the bottom of the craft.

To get to the engines he would have to pass that shaft, one blow of which would have crushed him to death, but it was imperative that the engines must be stopped if the vessel were to be saved.

Pete only hesitated for a moment. Carefully watching his opportunity, he darted past, and the crank came so close to his head that he felt the rush of air; then it came sweeping round, and actually touched his coat, but the next moment he had stopped the engine, and now he hurried from the place, for the fumes were so strong that it was almost impossible to breathe.

"How's de patient getting on, Sammy?" inquired Pete, not taking the slightest notice of what Jonathan was howling at him.

"I'm all right, Pete," said Jack. "What——"

"Shoo! You ain't to speak! You hab got to keep absolutely silent. Do you tink he ought to hab some nourishment, Sammy, so as to keep up his strength?"

"Most decidedly," said Sam. He knew Jack was all right now, and thought there would be some fun if Pete commenced to nurse him. "But what was the matter?"

"Only de crank come unfastened or broken. It ain't done any damage to speak ob. If you don't hold your row, Jonathan, I'll fetch a bucket and put your head into it! Jack has got to be kept quite quiet. Eh? De storm? I don't care about de storm or anyting else. Human life is more important dan storms. Well, it will come up again if it does go to de bottom. Let's hab a look in de stores. Tink he ought to hab some medicine, Sammy?"

"Most decidedly. I would advise a pint of the very best, and plenty of strong beef-tea."

"I dunno how to make it wid beef, and we ain't got any beef. I can make it wid tea-leaves. Do you tink dat would answer de purpose?"

"I think the medicine would be better."

"Look here, Sam," exclaimed Jack, "just you shut up! I'm not going——"

"Shoo, Jack! You ain't to talk! I shall hab to muzzle you if you do. Here's de bery ting. Extract ob meat. Dey don't say what sort ob meat it is extracted from, but I dare say it is strengthening. Phew, golly! It's strong enough, if you can judge by de perfume. Should say dey had been treating dis little lot like dey do Madeira, and sending it for two-free voyages. I will soon hab some boiling water."

It was useless for Jack to protest. Pete would not allow him to speak, nor would he pay the slightest heed to what he said, when he did speak against orders.

Pete emptied four bottles of extract of meat into a large bowl, and poured about a quart of boiling water over it; after that he took the fearful dose to Jack.

"Now, Jack, just you take dat little lot for de start. I dunno weder it is strong enough, but you'm got to take plenty ob nourishment frough de night."

"Quite so, Pete. Could you get me a biscuit to eat with it?" inquired Jack, who knew that it would be perfectly useless to argue the point. Pete had made up his mind that the dose was necessary, and there was the end of it. Jack did not want to have the awful dose poured down his throat while Pete held his nose, or anything like that.

Pete hurried away for the biscuits, and Jack emptied the concoction beneath his berth. When Pete returned with a small sack of ships' biscuits, Jack was smacking his lips and looking as though he had enjoyed the soup that was on the floor.

"Got frough dat all right, Jack!" exclaimed Pete. "You see, in a case like yours de strength has to be kept up. I don't quite know weder I made dat strong enough, but I will make you anoder basinful."

"That's right, Pete!" exclaimed Sam. "You look after him while I attend to the vessel. Make him a pailful, then he can sip it at his leisure."

"Nunno, Sammy. It has got to be eaten hot. You tink it was strong enough, Jack?"

"I should say it was strong enough to draw traction-engines up steep hills. But look here, Pete, I am all right now, and I'm going to get up."

"You ain't going to do anyting ob de sort. You hab got to lie in bed till Sam tinks you are cured, and if you won't do it ob your own free will, I shall tie you in. Now, see here, Jack, just you pledge me your word ob honour dat you won't get up till I gib you permission."

"Bother it, there is nothing——"

"Patients don't always know deir symptoms. If you won't gib me dat solemn promise I shall tie you down."

"But, look here, Pete——"

"I ain't looking anywhere. Are you going to make dat promise?"

"All right. I won't get up till to-morrow morning."

"Nunno, and you won't get up den. Still, I will take your word till dat time, and den I shall tie you up. Now, go to sleep, and I will bring you some more soup in 'bout an hour."

"How many bottles of the beastly stuff did you use?" inquired Jack.

"Only four."

"My dear fellow, how do you expect me to get strong on that? You ought to have put in forty."

Jack's idea was to get rid of all that was aboard at one fell swoop, but Pete's reply upset his calculations in a lamentable manner.

"Well, dat's all right, Jack. I will make you anoder little dose, and make it stronger."

"How many bottles are there?" gasped Jack.

"I dunno, Jack I ain't had time to count, but dere's a large case ob dem. Dey will last for some time. I'll bring you in some more brof directly."

"I can't drink any more to-night."

"Golly! You will sink from inundation!"

"I shall float from inundation, more likely. I can't——"

"Shoo! You'm talking a lot too much. You'm getting excited and feverish. Hallo, Sammy! How often is de patient to take his brof!"

"Every hour regularly, whether he wants it or not," answered Sam.

"That villain ought to have his head punched!" groaned Jack. "I wish I hadn't given that stupid promise."

"What am you gurgling and groaning like dat for, Sammy?" bawled Pete.

"I'm not. It's Jonathan."

"Is de man dying?"

"No, he's being seasick!"

"Yah, yah, yah! And he told me he had sailed all ober de world. Well, ask him if he would like some brof. Nunno? Well, he ought to hab someting. Ask him if I shall fry him a nice piece ob salt pork."

"You villain!" howled the unfortunate Jonathan. "I will about murder you if you don't hold your row!"

"You had better hab someting. Dere's some lard aboard, and I can fry you some salt pork in it. Should say de man must tink he's a sea-lion, de row he's making. Still, if he won't take any nourishment, it ain't my fault. I'm mighty certain dat Jack is going to take his regularly."

Jack groaned a little, but he hoped for the best. Pete absolutely refused to leave the cabin, and so Sam had to do his best, for Jonathan was in a state of collapse.

And Sam's task was no easy one, for the Firefly was not now under control, and the manner in which she rolled in the trough of the sea was something frightful. Jack, Sam, and Pete did not mind, neither did Rory, as they were all well accustomed to that sort of thing, but the unfortunate Jonathan got into such a state that he asked Sam to throw him overboard; not that he would really have wanted that done when the time came, but he spoke as he felt.

Pete allowed fifty-five minutes to elapse, and then he made another bowl of soup, and took it to Jack. It was considerably thicker than peasoup, and smelt very strongly of extract of meat.

"Look here, Pete," gasped Jack, "you will turn me into a bullock if you expect me to swallow that little lot!"

"Sammy says you must hab nourishment, Jack."

"Sam ought to be kicked! I am perfectly well, and——"

"Shoo! You'm talking a great deal too much. I don't want you to get more lightheaded dan you usually are. Sammy is a bery cleber medicated man, and if he says you need nourishment, den you can be quite sure dat he is right."

"Sam knows that I am as well as you are, and——"

"Shoo! You'm getting excited again. I ain't at all sure dat de gas isn't coming into dis cabin. At any rate, just you swallow dat, and I will hab anoder lot ready for you in an hour's time. I'm going to sit up to-night wid you, in case dere is a relapse."

Jack sat up in his berth, and placed his lips to the stuff.

"Could you let me have a little salt?" he inquired.

"Golly, I forgot de salt!" exclaimed Pete, hurrying into the little cabin where the stores were kept.

"Never mind, Pete!" shouted Jack, slopping his second lot of soup on the floor under his berth. "I think I will drink it as it is."

"I can easy get you de salt, Jack."

"No, thanks all the same! This will do nicely."

Pete was perfectly satisfied, and Jack suggested that he should lie down and get some rest.

"Eh?" exclaimed Pete.

"You have got an hour's sleep, you know."

"You will get up, if I do."

"Honour bright, I won't! I won't leave this cabin."

"Well, I know I can trust to your word, Jack. At de same time, I will just lock de door, and put de key in my pocket, 'cos you may hab a sort ob double meaning to your words, and in a serious case like yours it is best to make sure. Now, I will just lie on dis berth, and tink as to de best treatment dat should be giben to you."

Jack felt quite joyful when Pete's snore burst forth. It rendered sleep very difficult, and, in Jack's present state, quite impossible, but he had an idea that Pete would snore till break of day; and that, at least, would be a respite from the awful soup.

But Jack was quite mistaken. Pete slept for three-quarters of an hour, and then he awoke. Jack shammed sleep. It was useless. Pete waited till the hour was up, and then brought in another basin of the soup, and he gave Jack a shake. If Pete had been ordered to give a patient a sleeping draught, he would have waked him to make him take it. His ideas of sick nursing were peculiar, and most unpleasant for the patient.

"Did you put in salt, Pete?" inquired that patient.

"Golly! I forgot it again; but, neber mind, I'll soon fetch it, and——"

"Never mind, my dear fellow!" exclaimed Jack, slopping that basinful on the floor. "Don't trouble! I like it just as it is, thanks all the same! Are you feeling if bullocks' horns are growing out of my head?" inquired Jack, as Pete came back and placed his hand on the patient's brow.

"Nunno, Jack! I was feeling to see if you are sort ob feverish. Dere ain't de slightest fear ob your turning into anyting like a bullock. It's just possible dat you might turn into an old cab-horse, or, say, a tom-cat. I dunno anyting likely to gib you horns in dis extract, unless dey use snails for de purposes ob making it. Maybe dat dey use dragons."

All through that stormy night Pete snored and made soup by turns. Jack made excuses, and slopped his soup on the floor, and he felt truly thankful when day broke.

Pete timed his last hour to perfection, and at break of day he leapt out of bed.

"Hi, golly!" he yelled. "De vessel has sprung anoder leak!"

"What's that?" exclaimed Sam, hurrying into the cabin.

"Dere's anoder leak sprung!" exclaimed Pete, pointing to about a pailful of slop that was swamping about the cabin floor.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Sam, who grasped the situation immediately. "It doesn't look like sea-water, either. I rather fancy Jack has been throwing his medicine away."

"Now, look here, Pete!" cried Jack, springing from his berth. "Time is up, you know. My foolish promise has expired. All I require is salt pork and coffee."

"But didn't you take de soup, Jack?"

"Of course I didn't. I slopped the stuff on the floor. You ought to have used about a tablespoonful for the first dose, and you admitted that you used four bottles. If I had taken all you have made for me I should have swallowed about a pailful."

"I ain't at all pleased wid you, Jack. Sammy said distinctly dat you required nourishment, and it seems to me you ain't taken it. How much do you suppose you took?"

"None. How could any man drink the stuff? I should have swallowed about three bullocks if I had taken all you made for me."

"You neber would hab done dat, Jack. You might hab swallowed a horse or so, and a few cats, but dere's no bullocks in dat stuff. Dey keep dose for roast beef, and tings you can see. You couldn't tell weder dat extract was de scum of Bubbly Creek or stewed dragons. Soup-makers are much de same as beer-makers. Dey work for profits, and if you can make beer out ob cheap chemicals, and extract out ob I dunno what, it stands to reason dat de man ain't going to put bullocks into it. Nunno, if you want to become a peer ob de relm, and sign your name widout your Christian name, all you hab got to do is to start a brewery. As soon as a man becomes a brewer he becomes a lord; dat is to say if he makes enough beer and subscribes to some hospital and teetotal association."

"Shut up, you old humbug!" laughed Jack. "You know nothing about it."

"Well, dere's Lord Burtrent, and Lord Mopitup, and oder great men like dat. Still, we ain't got anyting to do wid dat. Say, Sammy, I wish you would make dis vessel roll a little less."

"I reckon that is what Jonathan is wishing," said Sam; "but my impression is that she is going to roll worse before we have finished this voyage. However, so long as she only rolls on the top of the water I don't care."

All through the day the storm raged—so did Jonathan. The only thing the comrades could do was to cruise about until the sea had gone down sufficiently to enable them to enter the inlet; but as the night came on the fury of the storm increased.

The lightning played incessantly from every part of the heavens, while the crashes of thunder were appalling.

But what the comrades had most to dread was the terrific fury of the wind. It raised huge seas that swept over the little vessel, burying her in masses of foam, and shaking her from stem to stern.

The storm raged all through the night, but just as day was breaking, the wind dropped considerably.

"I tink we'm going to get some fine weather now!" exclaimed Pete, glancing at the still black heavens.

"I reckon the storm is passing," answered Sam. "The glass is going up."

"Den dat's a sign dat de vessel ain't going down! I tink I will take de comforting news to Jonathan, dough I'm inclined to tink de man will need a lot ob comforting before he feels anyting like comfortable."

Pete was right. Jonathan, far from expressing pleasure at the news, told Pete to go and drown himself.

"Well, old hoss, you ought to cheer up under de circumstances, 'cos if we are anyting like lucky, you will be on dry ground in about twenty-four hours or so."

This was cold comfort. When a man is in Jonathan's state he reckons time by the second. Twenty-four hours look like twenty-four years to him; but Pete knew perfectly well that, even if the storm passed away, the sea would remain rough for a considerable time, and that it would be quite impossible to take the Firefly up the channel until the sea was comparatively calm.

Even when the sea went down to a heavy roll, it brought no relief to the unfortunate Jonathan. Indeed, that rolling appeared to affect him even more than the heavy pitching—if that were possible. He became so bad that the comrades felt rather anxious concerning him, but he absolutely refused to take anything, although Jack strongly advised him to have some brandy.

"Go away, you silly scoundrel!" groaned Jonathan. "Go away, and leave me to die in peace!"

"Golly!" exclaimed Pete, who had heard this conversation. "I don't call dat such a peaceful death, eider. Still, I am sorry for de old hoss."

Pete was about right concerning the twenty-four hours, and even when upwards of that time had elapsed, there was a heavy roll on the sea. However, Jonathan was so bad that the comrades determined to make the attempt that morning. As Pete put it, even if they wrecked the vessel, they would be able to swim to the shore.

Pete took the wheel, and Sam kept a keen look-out, instructing Jack, who was at the engines, to go easy ahead.

Thus they ran towards the narrow channel, up which the tide was flowing, though it was now nearly at its height.

The waves were breaking over the rocks on either side of the inlet, and by the broken water at other parts, Sam knew that submerged rocks were there, but he gave Pete very careful instructions how to steer, and they glided slowly up the channel without mishap, until they brought the Firefly to anchor in the smooth waters of the lagoon.

Now they went on deck, and in about a couple of hours Jonathan came up, looking as though he were just recovering from a severe attack of jaundice.

"Go and fetch me a dry biscuit and a glass of brandy-and-water!" he ordered, for he appeared to think that he had the right to order Pete about.

That worthy at once obeyed; and after Jonathan had swallowed the spirit he improved greatly.

"Feeling better now, ain't you, old hoss?" inquired Pete.

"It was a bilious attack," declared Jonathan. "I often suffer from them.

"I want to show you another invention of mine," said Jonathan, addressing Jack, for Pete's chaff had angered him. "I have got it in my workshop, and I may tell you that it is the most wonderful invention on earth."

"You told us the Firefly was that."

"One of the most wonderful, I said!" declared Jonathan. "But this other invention is beyond the conception of an ordinary man. No man has ever seen anything like it. I will show it to you. Pete, cook some food—something not too greasy."

One day later the party started for Jonathan's home, where they were to see and test what he described as "the most wonderful invention on earth."

THE END.

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