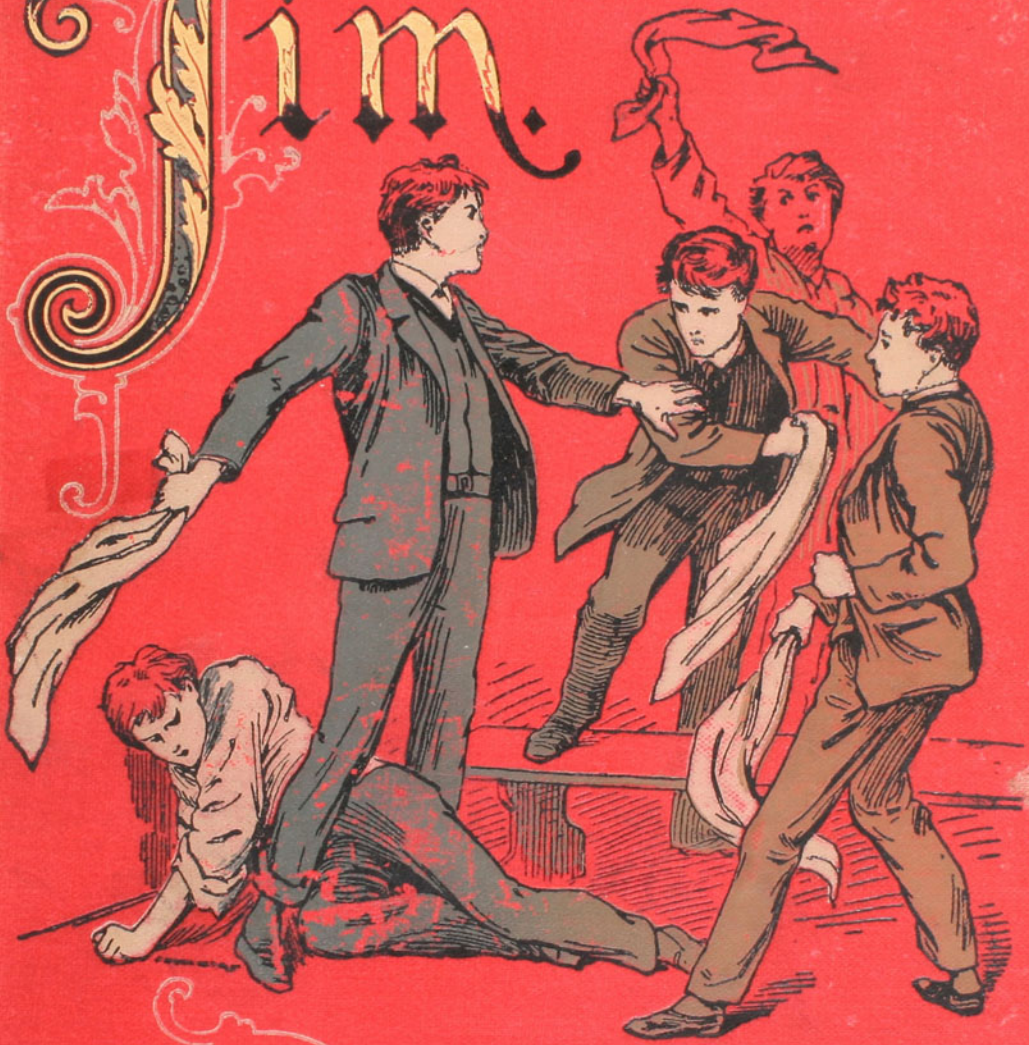
Jim.

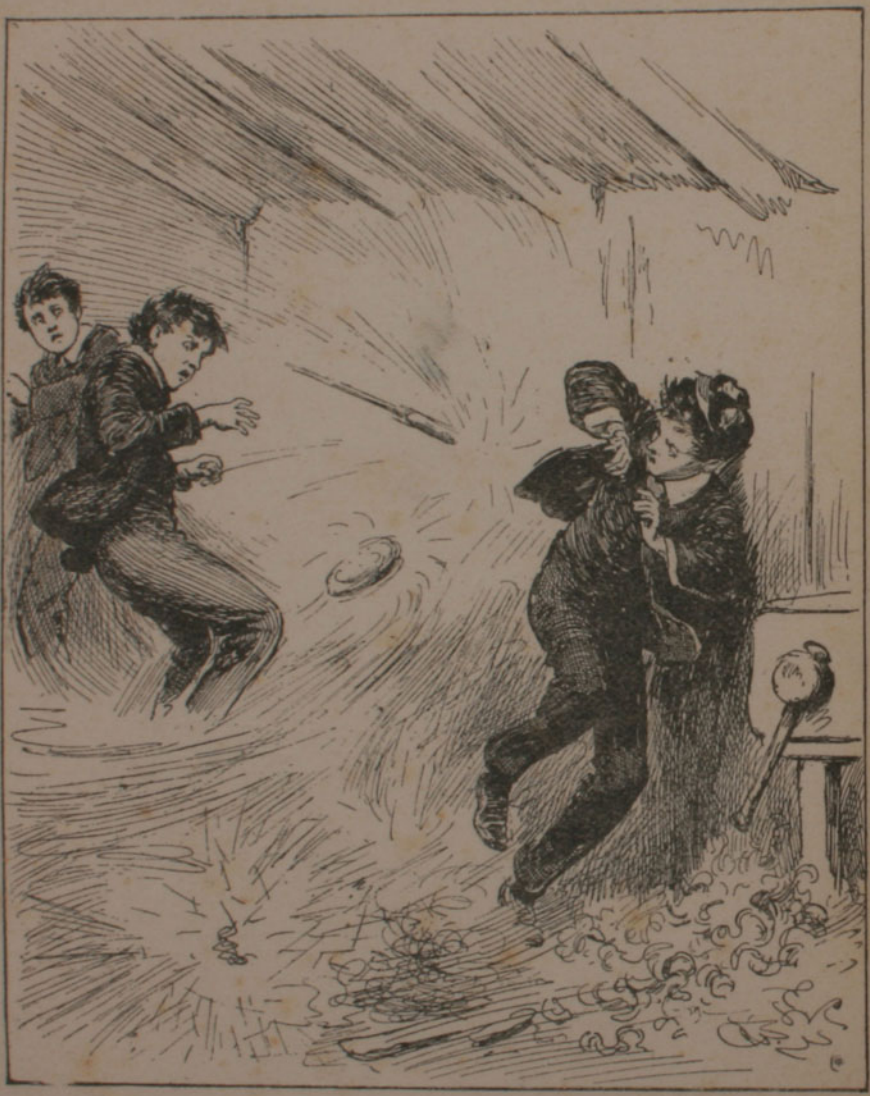


By Ismay Thorn

45,000 ap.

& SONS, PRINTERS, DURBAN.

Fernando Pessoa



"Wilson finds himself in the midst of sparks."—*Page* 152.

Fernando A. N. Pessôa

JIM

BY

ISMAY THORN

AUTHOR OF

"CAPTAIN GEOFF," "QUITE UNEXPECTED," "A FLOCK OF FOUR," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY GORDON BROWNE

LONDON

WELLS GARDNER, DARTON & CO.

3, PATERNOSTER BUILDINGS, E.C.

AND 44, VICTORIA STREET, S.W.


1894

CONTENTS.

TO THE READER.

As it has been said that the Author occasionally passes the limits of ordinary probability, this opportunity is taken of informing the Reader that what seems the most impossible incident in the history of "Jim" is taken from facts still more surprising. A few years ago a man passed a whole winter in the attic-roof of a school without being discovered. He left the house during the summer, but as winter approached he returned to his old quarters, and was only discovered by accident in the following spring.

I. T.

JIM.

CHAPTER I.

PARTED.

THE parting is over at last! Good-bye had been said very quietly when it came to the point, for was not everybody looking on, ready to offer sympathy to the boy who is left at home for one more day? Geoff is off to a public school, and to-morrow Jim will return to Mr. Allen's.

The miserable lump that has been in Jim's throat for some days whenever the different schools have been mentioned, now asserts itself again, rendering the younger boy speechless as Geoff withdraws his hand and jumps into the dog-cart beside his father.

Jim forces a rather ghastly smile, but then no one will criticise it, and waves his hand as the bend in the road hides from view the brother who has hitherto shared every pleasure, pain, and thought of his inmost heart.

Now all will be changed. Geoff's friends will not know Jim, Jim's will be equally ignorant of Geoff, and so it will be for the rest of their lives, for, from this day, their paths are divided.

If only Jim might go and have a comfortable cry like a

girl—but that is forbidden by his age and manliness, so he merely goes off to a particular corner in the old garden loft where no one can follow him, or say anything in a kind, would-be-comforting, but in reality wildly irritating tone.

"He bore the parting very well," says Miss Bethia, looking after him. "Poor Jim! He will feel it so much at first."

"Of course he will," says Uncle James, rather sharply—he has been distressed to see the silent pain in the boy's face—"and Jim will feel it more at school. Let him be, Bethia. He must fight this trouble out alone."

But the worst is over for Jim. Last night, when the house was all quiet, the two brothers had met for a last talk, and the *real* good-bye had been spoken then, and spoken with tears that, in spite of Jim's manliness, sent him to bed red-eyed and exhausted.

Geoff had been less miserable; but then there was the excitement, novelty, and much boyish hopefulness to keep up his spirits, when Jim, who knew to some extent what was before him, could only mutter that it was "too bad" and "a shame" to part them, and there was really no reason why they should not have kept together all their school-days.

"Father says he thought about it a great deal, and decided, as he hoped, for the best; so you mustn't call it 'a shame,' Jim, though I should have liked to have had you with me."

All this Jim recalls as he sits in his favourite corner of the garden loft over the potting shed, this bright, dry January day, deriving some small comfort from a packet of bull's eyes—a parting gift from Geoff, who knows well their soothing and consoling influence.

Fortunately for poor human nature, our sadness does not and cannot last; and Jim, who has armed himself with a book, suddenly finds himself breaking into peals of irresistible laughter over the misfortunes of Mr. Bultitude in *Vice-Versa*.

It is a comfort to all the household when Jim walks in to tea with a steady countenance; and though he keeps somewhat aloof from female petting, he can chatter to his great-uncle, Mr. James Harrington, about the book he has been reading, and asks if he may borrow it to take to school to-morrow. The result is that Uncle James writes the boy's name on the title-page, and Jim carries it up to his room that night, and puts it among his goods and chattels, that are being collected for the packing next day.

It seems very lonely going to bed, though for some time Geoff and Jim have had different rooms; but Geoff is rather a noisy neighbour, and now the silence next door is like a weight on Jim's spirits. It is, therefore, a comfort when his father comes in for a little talk on various subjects, and a chair is cleared for him to sit on; for to-night, of all nights, there is little or no vacant space.

"Have you got all your things together for your play-box?"

"Yes, father."

"That new bat of yours seems a capital one, but you won't want it this term. Shall I take care of it for you?"

"Oh, thank you, father. You will take care of it, won't you?"

"I will lock it up in the big cupboard in my room, where

it must be quite safe. You will have less to distract you from your lessons this term."

"There's football," says Jim; "but, of course, it was different last term after the cricket match in the summer. That match was awfully jolly; but last term was rather dull, and now Walton and I have made up our minds to work very hard. I want—oh! I *want* to be fit for a public school as soon as possible, because of Geoff."

"Brotherly love is a good thing, Jim, but you should be prepared for the fact that the union is not quite the same when boys have left the nursery and are growing into men. The love may be the same, but the paths of life are different. It must always be the case. No two brothers could have loved each other better than Uncle Jasper and I. We both intended to go into the army, and had hopes of keeping together for many years, for we went into Woolwich together, and came out together. But after a time Uncle Jasper got tired of it, changed his mind, and took up medicine as a profession. He said he could do more good by curing than by killing—that was his way of putting it. I only tell you this, Jim, because even if you follow Geoff to Blank, you will find it very different from being together at Mr. Allen's."

"Yes," answers Jim, "I know. I felt that last term, but then after all he *is* Geoff, and we must love each other better than mere friends, and we could talk sometimes, father—it's so difficult to talk to other fellows."

Major Harrington smiles, though he knows what Jim means. Serious matters *are* sometimes hard to speak of, and yet a boy may want some help or advice from an older lad just at a time when it seems most difficult to ask it.

"Who is the captain this term? Are you friendly with him?"

"Oh, yes. You know Garth. He's a capital fellow, but he isn't Geoff, of course. I dare say he'll keep friends with me for Geoff's sake. He and Geoff were great chums last term. It'll be all right, I dare say," says Jim, with a sudden yearning for sympathy, "only—it seems—hard—just at first—and I'm such a donkey—I can't help——"

If any one but his father had seen Jim—Jim who was soon to be eleven years old—Jim, the proud, the self-contained, the cool—as he sits for the next fifteen minutes curled up in father's arms, and sobbing away his heartache, like the child that he is—Jim would have defied him to mortal combat, or died of shame at such a discovery.

"Father—you don't think me a baby—for crying," he says suddenly, as the sighs and sobs grow quieter.

"My son, many of the best and greatest men on earth have shed bitter tears, such tears as no baby *can* shed."

And Jim is comforted.

CHAPTER II.

THE FIRST DAY OF THE TERM.

ON the following day, Jim's farewells are few and hurried; the only thing over which he lingers is Spot, Geoff's spaniel. Poor Spot has had a restless time of it during the last few days. His dislike to luggage, packing, anything that means change, or the departure of those he loves, makes him thoroughly uncomfortable, and at the end of the holidays his efforts to go to sleep and forget his troubles, make him an object of pity. Tot does what she can in the way of petting and comforting, but though he is grateful, and gives sudden licks at her nose, his sad eyes tell the truth. Tot is very kind, and he appreciates her attentions, but it is the *boys* he is wanting, and Geoff in particular.

Girls are nice enough in the house, or at meal times, thinks Spot, but they are no good out of doors. If he barks, they say, "Be quiet, sir!" and Spot hates to be told to be quiet—it offends his sense of dignity. There is no *fun* to be had with the girls, and that is Spot's opinion as he curls himself up on the hall mat, and wishes he could sleep till the next holidays begin.

As for Jim, driving along in the dog-cart beside his father, now that good-bye is said, and home is actually left behind, matters begin to look a little brighter. There is one real and definite consolation to be had from Geoff's

absence. Jim will no longer be Harrington Minor, and no tongue can tell how that small word of five letters has rankled in Jim's lofty mind. He had betrayed the fact to Geoff early in their school career, but Geoff showed an elder-brotherly indifference which was depressing, and when Jim wrathfully declared he "would not stand it," Geoff told him, with more common-sense than tenderness, not to be a donkey, and on no account to let the boys see he minded it, for if he *did* there would be no peace for him. Jim had wisely followed this advice, and no one but Geoff had known of the continued offence to Jim's self-importance in that word Harrington *Minor*, which will now, he hopes, be dropped. Jim enjoys his drive, and by the time they reach The Birches, the boy has begun to look forward to meeting all his friends again.

Garth has arrived five minutes before them, and stands in the hall with Mr. Allen, who is surveying with satisfaction a heap of dead hares and rabbits, a very welcome present from the Hon. Thomas Garth, M.P.

Tom Garth, his eldest son, upon whom the captaincy of the school has descended, is a nice-looking boy, with a good, straight figure, and very honest blue eyes, yet in many respects the very opposite of the last captain, Geoff Harrington. He is easy-going, almost to laziness, takes things as they come, and is content with doing what he thinks right, without interfering too much with his neighbours. In this respect he is the reverse of Geoff, who felt when he was captain that he was responsible for the *morale* of the whole school, and if the boys fought, or stole, or told lies, it became his personal disgrace as their head.

Several times had Geoff wished for Garth's power of not worrying over the faults of the other boys.

"What *does* it matter?" Garth would exclaim in astonishment, that also had a tinge of admiration for the boy who already accepted life and its trials rather seriously; "if the fellows *will* make asses of themselves, why should *you* mind, so long as you are not expected to do the same?"

"I don't know," Geoff would answer, in a worried sort of way; "I dare say it's all right, only I feel that I am responsible, somehow," and Garth had laughed at him.

This responsibility now rests on Garth, but he seems in no way to feel its burden as he stands in the hall and listens to Mr. Allen, at the same time giving Jim a little patronising nod.

Jim's arrival leads to Garth's dismissal, and while, after shaking hands with his "master," Jim and his luggage go round to the boy's entrance, Major Harrington and Mr. Allen have a few minutes' conversation.

If boys could only know all the loving, anxious thoughts of parents and masters, there might be some fewer aching hearts in the world; for they would not deliberately bring sorrow and grey hairs, tears and wakeful nights to their parents, could they but be made to realise in the beginning what they are doing. Often when they *do* realise it it is too late; too late for the parents, when sorrow and tears and wakeful nights have done their cruel work, or too late for the boy when bad habits have got the upper hand, and are more powerful even than the voice of love.

Mr. Allen and Major Harrington are old friends by this time, and understand each other. They have each questions to ask, Major Harrington's inquiries being for Mr. Allen's

son, Fabius, and Mr. Allen asks in his turn about Geoff, and hopes he will take a good place in his form at Blank. Then they come to the real subject of their conversation, which is Master Jim, who has already made his way into the schoolroom, and is staring half-a-dozen new boys out of countenance.

"What's your name?" he suddenly asks of one boy.

"Macklin," answers the other very promptly.

"What, a brother of Walter Macklin's?"

"Yes."

"Oh, that's all right! He's a friend of ours, particularly of my brother's. Look here, Clark, has Walton come?"

"Yes, he's in Mrs. Swift's room, unpacking a hamper."

"Trust him for that!" laughs Jim. "I'll go and look at him."

A minute later he is hanging round Mrs. Swift's neck.

"Oh, you dear Mrs. Swift, it *is* nice to see you again! How are you? Have the holidays been *very* dull without us? What's the news of Fabius, and has he been to the gold diggings yet, and made a fortune with a nugget as big as his head? Why don't you answer, instead of laughing? Walton, old fellow, how are you? You look pretty well considering—doesn't he, Mrs. Swift? Oh! I say, what jolly pots of jam!"

"You're to have one at tea, Jim, so you had better get ready."

"All right, only my father's still here, and I haven't said good-bye yet."

And Jim rushes off to cast himself once more into his father's arms, and hold him very tight for a moment, as he whispers, with great earnestness, the old childish phrase, "Father, I *will* be a good boy."

CHAPTER III.

CAPTAIN GARTH.

"I SAY, you fellows, we can't have all this row," says Garth suddenly, lifting his voice above the Babel-like sounds in the schoolroom. "Mr. Allen will be sending up, and I shall get into hot water; so be quieter, all of you."

There has been immediate silence, to hear what Garth is saying; and before the boys can gather again the broken threads of their conversation, Jim's voice is heard rippling with laughter.

"I say, look at Garth doing captain!"

"Ah!" says Garth quietly, "and that reminds me that I have something to tell all of you. You'd better at once understand that I'm not going to bother about you like Geoff Harrington, and I'm not going to make myself miserable if you don't do what you're told, because, if you won't mind me, you *must* mind the masters. If we each do what is right, we shall get on very well as a whole, and I don't see why we shouldn't—do you?"

"Hear, hear!" shouts the irrepressible Jim.

"Three cheers for Garth!" says Teddy Crofts suddenly, and a terrific roar is the result, during which tumult Mr. Littlejohn comes in to know what the noise means. He is told very gravely by Garth that it is an irrepressible burst of enthusiasm at the conclusion of a little speech on good

behaviour he had been making, and Mr. Littlejohn retires, laughing.

As the door closes Garth looks round, and the more than half-ironical cheer is replaced by a genuine murmur of grateful admiration.

"Well done, old fellow! you got us out of that," says Teddy Crofts cheerfully; "if you'll only stick by us, we'll stick by you."

"That's likely enough until our interests or opinions clash," says Garth. "However, you aren't quite such a turbulent set as last year, I hope and believe. By-the-bye, where's Robinson?"

"Coming back to-night."

"And what's the news of Fabius?"

There is silence—none of the boys have asked except Jim, and finding no one answers, Jim says he hears that Fabius is much better and is allowed to walk a little every day; that Mr. Sedges is "awfully kind," and seems very fond of his young companion.

Walton has much to tell Jim about the fun he had during the holidays.

"My mother says that next holidays you must come and stay with *us*, Jim," he says. "She wants to know you better because you're my friend."

"I shall like——" begins Jim, and then he stops. "Oh! I'm sorry that I shan't be able to come now," he continues, "because you see there's Geoff—I've Geoff only in the holidays now."

Walton has no brothers or sisters, and to him friendship is everything, so he looks rather offended at Jim's reply.

"Then you won't come?" he says, in an injured tone.

"Why, how *can* I?" asks Jim; "it's my only time with Geoff now, and it'll seem short enough, I know."

Walton does not choose to understand, and begins to doubt whether Jim is really a friend worth cultivating. Some one without a brother would be more satisfactory.

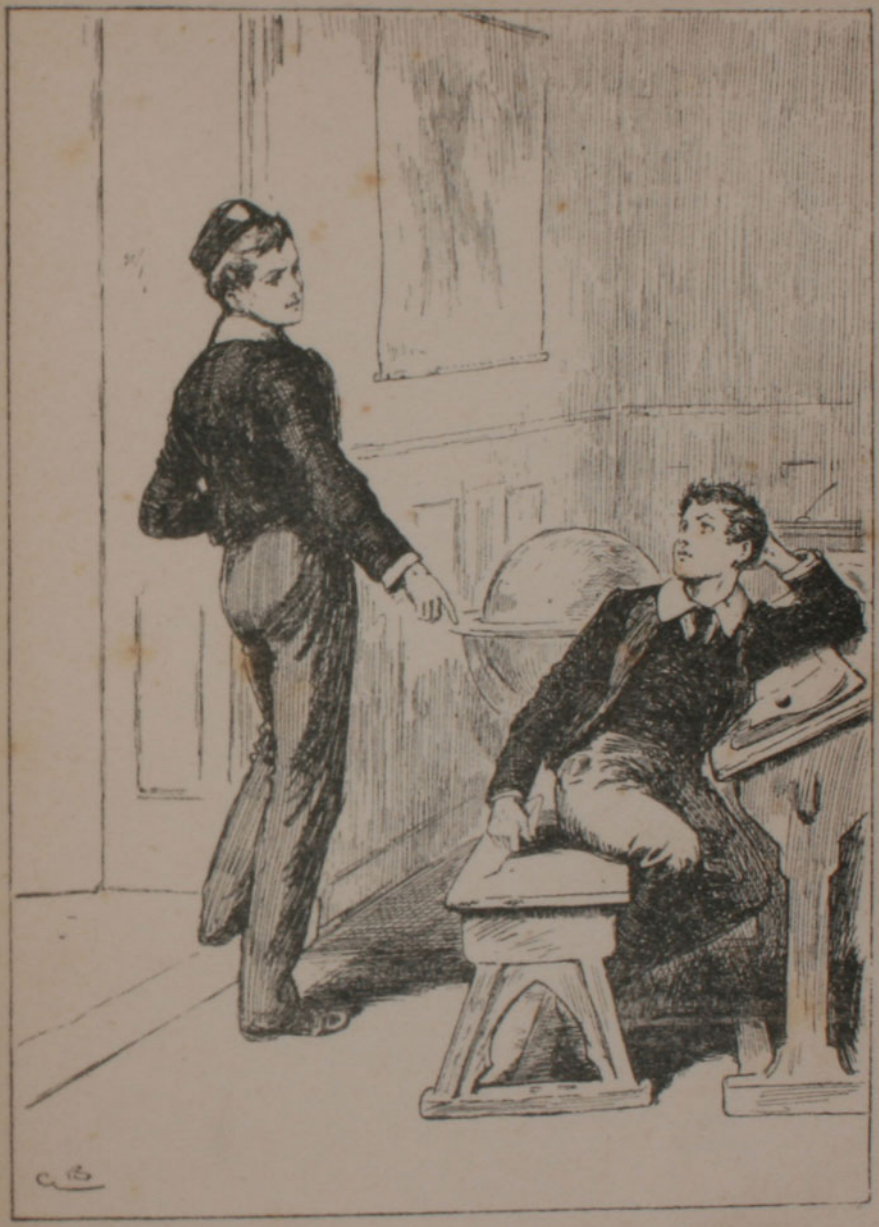
Jim's first letter to Geoff is full of school news.

"My dear Geoff," it runs, "it seems very strange without you, but I'm getting used to it. Garth is captain now, and he's very civil to me. Lots of boys have asked after you. Fabius is better and learning to walk again; Mr. Sedges likes him very much, and he likes Mr. Sedges, so they get on all right. Walton's cross because I won't promise to stay with him next holidays. I want to be with you. I like young Macklin very much. He says Walter is no end of a sap, and gets lots of prizes. Clark is still here, and Sexton, Crofts, and a lot of the other fellows; also some new chaps. Two of them are North and West, and Clark calls them the points of the cumpus. Fabius is sending Mr. Allen a box full of treasures and curiosities that he has been collecting. He will not be home again till after Easter. This is an awfully long letter, so I hope you'll write the same.—Your affectionate brother, JIM."

"*P.S.*—I looked up all the words in the dictionary, but I couldn't find cumpus, though I looked all down the cums."

As Jim finishes his letter Garth comes by, and glances at the envelope.

"Don't leave that open," he says, pointing to it. "I



"'Don't leave that open,' said Garth."

mean to put a stop to that stupid rule now. It isn't done at other schools, and Mr. Robinson's on my side, I know; but Sep's got some queer notions about things, and doesn't like altering rules. Mind you stick up your letter."

"But I don't care if it *is* read," declares Jim.

"Never mind, that has nothing to do with it. Stick it up, and say I told you to," says Garth, and passes on, leaving Jim in some perplexity.

What is he to do? Who is he to obey? The rule is Mr. Allen's; but it may be more unpleasant for Jim if he disregards Garth's orders. For a few minutes the boy looks worried, then he cheers up, carries his letter to the basket in the hall, and returns to his place with all his usual imperturbability.

An hour later the letter-basket is carried away, and shortly after Mr. Allen comes into the schoolroom.

"How is it, boys, that you have all—all but *one*, I should say—fastened up your letters this afternoon?"

Garth steps forward at once.

"If you please, sir, we—we wished to *protest* against that rule. It is not usual, and it's very disagreeable, and we hope you will alter it, sir."

Garth stands there a very sturdy young champion, only, unfortunately, he has not gone the right way to work. Mr. Allen really cares very little about the matter; the boys' letters are hardly ever looked at, and his only reason for not altering the rule long ago is that it occupies a conspicuous place on the great blackboard of "rules," painted in the time when his father kept the school, fifty years ago.

"If this was your suggestion, Garth, you have not begun

by setting the school a very good example of obedience and subordination. There are other means of 'protesting,' as you call it, better than by openly breaking the rule of which you complain. I have for some time been considering the matter, as the rule was in reality merely a form. I do not think I have looked into a dozen letters in the last three years, for do you suppose, boys, that it is a literary treat to me to study your compositions?"

There is no answer, and Mr. Allen continues.

"It may surprise you, but it is more than a year since *any* letter has been read. You may, therefore, believe that it will be no hardship to me to grant this request of yours, and I would have done so more gladly if you had declared your wishes in a more becoming manner. As for the one boy who obeyed the rule," continues Mr. Allen, his eyes fixed on the window at the further end of the schoolroom, "I wish him and all of you to know that I think more highly of him for respecting my rule rather than his schoolfellows' vagaries."

And Mr. Allen goes out, leaving the boys uncertain whether they have gained a victory or suffered a defeat. But one thing they *all* wish to know, and that is, who is the boy that ventured to disobey the captain. Garth calls upon him to speak up if he isn't a coward, and Jim's voice answers immediately.

"What on earth did you do it for?" asks Garth, annoyed, and yet unable to be as angry with Jim as he wishes to be. "Why didn't you do as I told you?"

"Well," says Jim, after a slight pause, "you see I couldn't obey two people when they said exactly opposite things,

could I? So I thought for some time what I'd better do, and as my father sent me to Mr. Allen's, I made up my mind to do as *he* told me. But I'll tell you what, Garth—if you like I'll ask my father to send me to your school, and then, of course, I must obey you."

Garth is good-tempered, or Jim would hardly have ventured on such a speech, and, as it is, one or two of the elder boys catch him and demand his immediate punishment.

"Let him go," says Garth, laughing; "I wouldn't have you in my school, Jim. You deserve to have your ears boxed for cheek, and the wonder is that we don't do it, just because for once you're in the right and we are all in the wrong."

CHAPTER IV.

THE MARTYRDOM OF MR. LITTLEJOHN.

IT has been stated elsewhere that Mr. Littlejohn, the third English master, is a gentleman without much strength of character. He is, moreover, of a kindly and forgiving disposition, for which reason he is made to suffer many things by the boys.

His class is held in a little room off the big schoolroom, and there the youngest and backwardest boys stumble through their daily lessons. On one side of the room, to the right of Mr. Littlejohn's desk, is a big cupboard, in which is kept various household properties. A long-handled broom, a pail, scrubbing-brush, and flannel, with some easels, an old disused blackboard, and sundry other articles pass a usually peaceful and undisturbed life in the cupboard, except at the hour when Sarah goes daily for the broom, and bi-weekly for the pail and scrubbing-brush.

It is during a wet afternoon that Jim, Walton, Percy Macklin, and Charlie Sexton find themselves at the door of the cupboard without any definite occupation, and one of the party happens to pull open the door and look in.

"What a jolly place for a lark," says Jim incautiously; "just think how Mr. Littlejohn would jump if all these things came tumbling out one fine day, just in the middle of lessons."

Several boys have come near and peer in, listening intently to Jim's words.

"It couldn't be done," says Walton.

"Couldn't it!" retorts Jim contemptuously; "it's as easy as—anything! Look here, you'd only have to tie a long string to the broom, and bring it down here, and out under the door, then pile up the things against the door, and when the string was pulled—crash! there you'd be!"

"And the string would tell the tale," says Sexton.

"No, because the nearest boy would cut it off near the door, and the rest would be wound up by a boy at the end of the room. It could easily be done if I——"

Here Jim is called away for a few minutes, and on his return has entirely forgotten the mischief he has so skilfully planned.

Then Fred Clark comes in with a pencil and scrap of paper in his hand, and he is at once requested (being the poet of the school) to read his last inspiration, only the reading is spoilt by his irrepressible giggles.

Sexton, looking over Clark's shoulder, reads the words as they are written. If history speaks truth, Clark is not the only poet whose spelling has been somewhat faulty.

"There is a difrance very grate
Between football and cricket,
In the last you hit it with a bat,
And in the first you kick it."

Shouts of delight hail this verse, and then subside as Garth, who has been standing in the doorway, calls out, "Bravo, Clark! Give us the rest."

"There isn't any more," says Clark modestly; "but if you like it so much, I can do another verse easily."

A slight pause follows, and then Clark begins to write, while Sexton, looking over once more, gives signs of great delight.

"I should not like to be a ball,
To be thus nocked about,
I'd rather be a top with a whip,
Or else——"

"An ass without!" interpolates Garth, as Clark makes a slight pause over his last line; "your verses don't scan, and if I were the Queen I shouldn't make you Poet Laureate."

The next day, about the middle of the morning, there is a terrific noise in the small class-room, but no explanation is given, and by the time the boys are assembled in the playground, it has been forgotten.

The following day a similar noise is heard, and then—it flashes into Jim's mind that his imagined trick with the cupboard has been put into practice.

After lessons he questions the boys, and on finding that they have twice managed it very successfully, he threatens them with his utmost displeasure if they do it again, and goes to find Garth, that he may add the weight of his word to Jim's.

But Garth merely shrugs his shoulders, and says he isn't going to interfere. Jim should not have told them how to do it if he didn't wish it done, and if they choose to carry out his instructions, they must take their chance of punishment. Garth has not lowered his voice while uttering these sentiments, and the small class-room scouts soon bring word that the captain has no intention of meddling.

The next day the cupboard door again flies open, this

time with such violence that the broomstick gives an extra bound and falls with a loud crack on Mr. Littlejohn's unlucky head. The boy who should cut the string is dismayed for the moment and does not move as quickly as usual, the result being that the other boy at the end of the room gives a pull and drags the broom-stick a few inches along the floor, which Mr. Littlejohn at once perceives. He also sees the first boy stoop and cut the string, and in a moment has the offender by the ear.

"Stand up," says Mr. Littlejohn, "you will please to remain standing there, holding those scissors, until this class is over, and then you will come with me to Mr. Allen."

Jim, in the other room, hears the crash and gives a little frown, and Mr. Robinson, who sits at that end of the big schoolroom, also notices the unusual sound.

"Just go and see what that noise is, Harrington," he says; "I heard it yesterday about the same time." And Jim goes to the little class-room door.

Standing not far from the master's chair is Wilson, a new boy, who holds a pair of scissors. The cupboard door is open, and its contents are lying on the floor just as when they fell. Mr. Littlejohn, with a mark across his eyebrow and forehead, which is rapidly showing signs of becoming a black eye, is hearing the class in a rather nervous and agitated manner.

Jim looks indignantly at Wilson and returns to make his report to Mr. Robinson. But how is he to make it? He knows quite well what has happened, but he did not see it occur, and has asked no questions, therefore if he tells what

he knows, he may be questioned as to how he gained his knowledge. On the other hand, if he speaks of an accident or feigns ignorance he will not be speaking the truth. How could he be so stupid as to point out to others a way of being disobedient and troublesome and yet not expect them to profit by his instructions!

He walks back rather slowly and changes colour as Mr. Robinson looks up at him and says, "Well?"

"The cupboard door has been opened with a string, sir, and the things all fell out."

"How do you mean? By accident or on purpose?"

"On purpose," says Jim, with a slight writhe, as he sees three pairs of eyes suddenly fixed on him, and remembers that Walton, Sexton, and Macklin were all present when he made his foolish suggestion.

"How do you know?" asks Mr. Robinson.

Jim stands silent, and then he says, "May I tell you later, sir?" and as Mr. Robinson answers in the affirmative, Jim goes back to his seat in silence.

All the annoyance of a false position is Jim's portion, and he feels almost more annoyed with himself than if he were really guilty—which is only foolish pride.

When the class is over in the small schoolroom, Mr. Littlejohn marches Wilson off to Mr. Allen's study, and there tells his tale. He tells it fairly, even kindly, though he has an aching head and discolouring eye, but even Wilson thinks he puts it in the best light he can.

Mr. Allen looks more severe than he feels. He does not, of course, approve of such tricks, but they are merely foolish and boyish, and may be more lightly dealt with

than faults of character. He listens with some inward amusement to the account of how the trick was managed, and with outspoken wonder at the ingenuity for mischief that seems ingrain in boyish minds.

"If only you would expend one-half the thought and pains on your lessons that you will give to a piece of mischief, I should have a school of young prodigies. But who was the inventor of this trick? Was it your own idea, Wilson?"

Neither Mr. Allen nor Mr. Littlejohn are prepared for the reply.

"No, sir. It was Harrington."

CHAPTER V.

A CONTINUATION OF THE SAME.

"SEND Harrington to me," says Mr. Allen, but Jim is not to be found at the moment. He is in Mr. Robinson's room making his own confession, and it is a quarter of an hour before he comes out, and, not aware that he has already been sent for, knocks at the door of Mr. Allen's study.

Seeing Mr. Littlejohn, he is going to draw back, but is at once ordered in and the door closed.

"Where have you been, Harrington, that you were not to be found when I sent for you?"

"I was with Mr. Robinson, sir."

Mr. Allen looks at Jim and at Wilson, then he says that he will see Jim alone, but Jim, doubly distressed at this, asks if they may hear what he has to say. Then he makes Mr. Allen and Mr. Littlejohn understand what has taken place, and explains how foolish he has been. Only once does he lower his eyes under Mr. Allen's keen glance—that is when he is asked why he did not make Garth interfere.

"It's different now, sir; the Captain isn't my brother."

"Certainly not, but you should have applied to him. He might have put all this nonsense to rights without our having to interfere in the matter. I do not blame you for more than thoughtlessness, except in not going to Garth and asking for his help."

Jim looks regretful, and listens to this rebuke in silence, but Wilson suddenly startles them all by exclaiming, "Why, Harrington, you *did* ask him, and he said he didn't care and wasn't going to bother himself about kids; I heard him say that myself."

Jim flashes a furious glance at the speaker, and Mr. Allen lays a hand on the boy and draws him nearer.

"Is this true, Jim?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I told all my own part, sir," says Jim, recovering his usual manner now that he has nothing to conceal.

"Ah! well, I suppose that is all I can expect from you. You may go, my boy."

Jim goes, but not without giving Wilson a warning look which he is too dense to understand. He, therefore, gaily tells the names of all the boys concerned in the cupboard trick, and as there are about a dozen of them, they are kept in that afternoon to write an impot of a hundred lines. Jim, who is in their eyes the arch-offender, goes out merrily after a full explanation with Garth.

The captain does not get off scot free, for he is overburdened by an invitation to tea with Mr. and Mrs. Allen, and during the hour he spends afterwards in the master's private study, Mr. Allen takes the opportunity of pointing out to him the responsibilities of his position.

"Such a mean advantage to take!" thinks Garth; "because I have eaten a few buttered muffins at his table he thinks he may say anything to me. I've heard it all a dozen times before!"

"No one would think so," whispers Conscience, and Garth begins to feel just a little ashamed of himself when Mr. Allen says he will lecture him no longer, but bids him good night with a hope that they will all do better in the future.

Some of the boys are still feeling very sore about their punishment, and they are by no means certain whether Jim or Wilson is most to blame. When questioned on the subject, Wilson gets out of the difficulty as best he can, and Jim remains the scapegoat. Nor is it long before his talents all but get him again into trouble.

He is making a fancy portrait of Walton one afternoon, when half-a-dozen boys have been kept indoors with bad colds, and Wilson, desirous of seeing what Jim will make of his face, asks for a portrait of himself. It is done in a few strokes and handed to Wilson, who looks at it in silence.

"Like—isn't it?" laughs Jim.

"It must be, if you think so. Won't you sign it?" he asks politely, and Jim obligingly signs his name below and is thanked with mock gratitude.

Next day Mr. Littlejohn sees a piece of paper passing from boy to boy in the class, and more than once calls out that it must be put away. Each time it re-appears after a short pause, and at length, his patience being exhausted, Mr. Littlejohn exclaims, "I cannot have this! Bring that paper to me."

The boy who has it, rises with alacrity, and hands the now well-thumbed paper to his master, who opens it.

Every eye is fixed on him as he starts, colours, and crumples up the paper; then on second thoughts he puts it

into his pocket and faces the class as steadily as he can. It is a trying ordeal, for every boy is grinning, and this sight, combined with his own irritation, produces in the unlucky master a desire to break into hysterical laughter.

"Now, *young gentlemen*," he says, in somewhat sarcastic tones, "let us go on with our business, if you please;" and the expected "fun" falls flat.

"At any rate, Harrington will catch it *now*," thinks Wilson cheerfully.

But Jim seems to carry a charmed existence as far as punishments are concerned. Meeting Mr. Littlejohn in the passage, the master suddenly stops him and asks if the drawing belongs to him. Jim laughs a most unguilty laugh and answers promptly that he drew it for Wilson, who wanted his likeness taken.

"An excellent likeness," says Mr. Littlejohn, with an amused look at Jim's perfectly innocent face; "but as Wilson has given it to me I mean to keep it"—and he passes on, leaving Jim rather bewildered.

"I say!" he remarks later when he meets Wilson, "what did you mean by giving my portrait of you to Mr. Littlejohn?"

"Did he show it to you? What did he say?"

"He asked if it was mine and I said yes, I drew it for you, as your portrait, so he said it was an excellent likeness, and he meant to keep it."

Wilson draws a long breath, and one or two boys near gasp, "Well, you *are*——" and can get no further.

"Are what?" asks Jim.

"Are the most wonderful eel for wriggling out of well-deserved punishments," laughs Garth, who is standing near.

"I saw that picture and recognised it immediately. We shall have Mr. Allen sending for you, and telling you with tears that you have mistaken your vocation and should become an artist, as you would be an R.A. in no time."

Garth's description is not as unlike what actually takes place as might be imagined.

Mr. Allen sits with the paper before him laughing, while Mr. Robinson looks over and comments on the cleverness of the sketch. At the top of the paper "you" is scrawled (probably by Wilson), but below, drawn in surprisingly few strokes, is the head of a donkey that has even a quaint look of the boy it is intended to represent, and underneath is Jim's name in his round, upright, small-copy-book writing and "fecit" with a flourish.

"It is certainly clever," says Mr. Robinson; "Jim will find his drawing useful later if he will only take pains."

"Yes, but 'there is much virtue in *if*,'" replies Mr. Allen. "One thing is clear, these boys must not continue their impertinence to Littlejohn. To-morrow we will have a change. I will take your class, Littlejohn, if you will take Robinson's and he will take mine."

The result of this arrangement is that there is a morning's work done in the little class-room which the boys are not likely to forget in a hurry.

CHAPTER VI.

AIR-BALLS.

THERE is fashion in everything and it is not confined, as some would have us suppose, to ladies' dresses or the ways of society. Even at The Birches there is a fashion—that, for instance, which considers marbles a game not to be played by any but "cads," and that one term guinea-pigs are "in" and white rats are "out," when the next term dormice are the rage and guinea-pigs nowhere.

It is this same fashion that introduces a rage for air-balls, and the boy who owns the largest, tightest, and strongest is envied by his fellows.

Walton has a splendid one, sent by his mother with particular instructions that he is not to injure his lungs in blowing it out. This injunction is given because the ball comes by post in a shrivelled, airless condition, and is blown out by Alfred and Jim in the playground, and tied up with a fine silk thread to keep in the air. For a time this ball is by far the largest and best, but one wet afternoon when Walton and Jim are in the schoolroom showing it off to an admiring crowd, it comes down on Wilson's hand and shrivels up so suddenly that it is impossible for the culprit to conceal the pin he has been holding under it.

"Well, of all mean things!" says Jim hotly, while Walton examines the hole as if he hoped it may possibly mend.

"I can't help it," says Wilson, with just enough of truth in his false argument to make it difficult to contradict. "If your ball comes down on my hand just when I happen to have a pin in it, it really isn't my fault. I didn't go to it, the ball came to me."

"What were you doing with a pin?" asks Jim.

"Nothing. I took it out of my coat just now. I suppose because you choose to have an air-ball we're not expected to give up all our pins—are we?"

Jim says no more, but Walton writes home for another ball, and a truly splendid one comes this time. When fully blown out it is eighteen inches in diameter, and is made of really strong, dark red indiarubber. Of this ball Walton and Jim take the greatest care, and it outlives many less fortunate rivals. Unfortunately one day some of the boys begin talking of the Crystal Palace fireworks, and the balloons with magnesium light that are sent off from the towers, and how they float because they are filled with gas. This leads to an ambition on Walton's part to fill his ball with gas so that it will rise, and nothing will satisfy him but that the experiment shall be made.

Jim suggests asking Mr. Robinson's leave to fill it at bed-time in the passage, but Walton thinks that very likely the request will be refused, and then—as he *must* fill it, with or without permission—it will be the worse for him if it has been already forbidden. The Birches is rather an old house, and Mr. Allen is exceedingly particular with regard to fire.

"Do give it up, Alf, or wait till the holidays. If you come to us, father would fill it, I'm sure, or Uncle James. It's no good trying to do it here. We *can't*, and there's an end,"

But it is not at an end as far as Walton is concerned. He is obstinate and does not choose to listen to Jim; also there is an unfortunate instability about him, shown in a tendency to go over to the enemy upon the slightest contradiction from his friends. Walton is older than Jim, nearly a year older, and there are times when he thinks that Jim is too much inclined to take the lead, as indeed he is; but then he is a safer leader than Walton, and he knows it.

Among the new boys Jim has soon made friends with Percy Macklin and Henry Savile, who are both nice boys, willing to be on good terms with the boys and with their masters. Not so Wilson, who looks upon all masters as a cat does upon dogs, as natural enemies, powerful for evil, and able and willing to inflict much suffering.

Wilson is not a *bad* boy, though not absolutely truthful, but his bent is more for the mischief that comes under the head of "fun" than for actual insubordination. He is, in fact, ready for anything that is amusement, and willing to undertake the hardest tasks if they are to lead to the forwarding of some plan.

Fred Clark is also rather a ne'er-do-weel, while Sam Moss is a bird of the same feather. Parsons, Finch, North, and West are also of the more careless, reckless class of schoolboy, and they are all ready to receive Walton, a boy with plenty of pocket-money, into their fold, as he can be persuaded to expend it freely for the benefit of any foolish scheme in which he can be made to take an interest.

To these boys Walton falls an easy prey when not protected by the more youthful, but far more practical, Jim, and as soon as he finds that Jim will not fill his ball with

gas on the sly for him, he goes to Wilson and enlists his sympathy.

"Harrington won't do it? Oh! he's a muff and a prig. *I'll* do it for you, see if I don't. I'll do it to-night—I'm not *afraid!*"

Jim has learned to pass such taunts with a little smile of contempt, but he is still anxious to try and persuade Walton not to join with such a shatter-brain as Wilson. Alfred, however, avoids meeting him alone, and he is therefore unable to speak to him about it, for which he is sorry. Macklin soon joins him and suggests that they should go out together, to which Jim consents. As they go along the passage they hear one of the maids speaking to Mrs. Swift.

"Indeed, I saw it, mum. I was coming out of the kitchen all on a sudden, and I saw it quite plain. I called Elizabeth, but she didn't come quick enough, and it vanished."

"What nonsense, Sarah! How can you be so foolish!" says Mrs. Swift rather sharply; "I am surprised that you can talk such nonsense, and pray do not let the boys hear you."

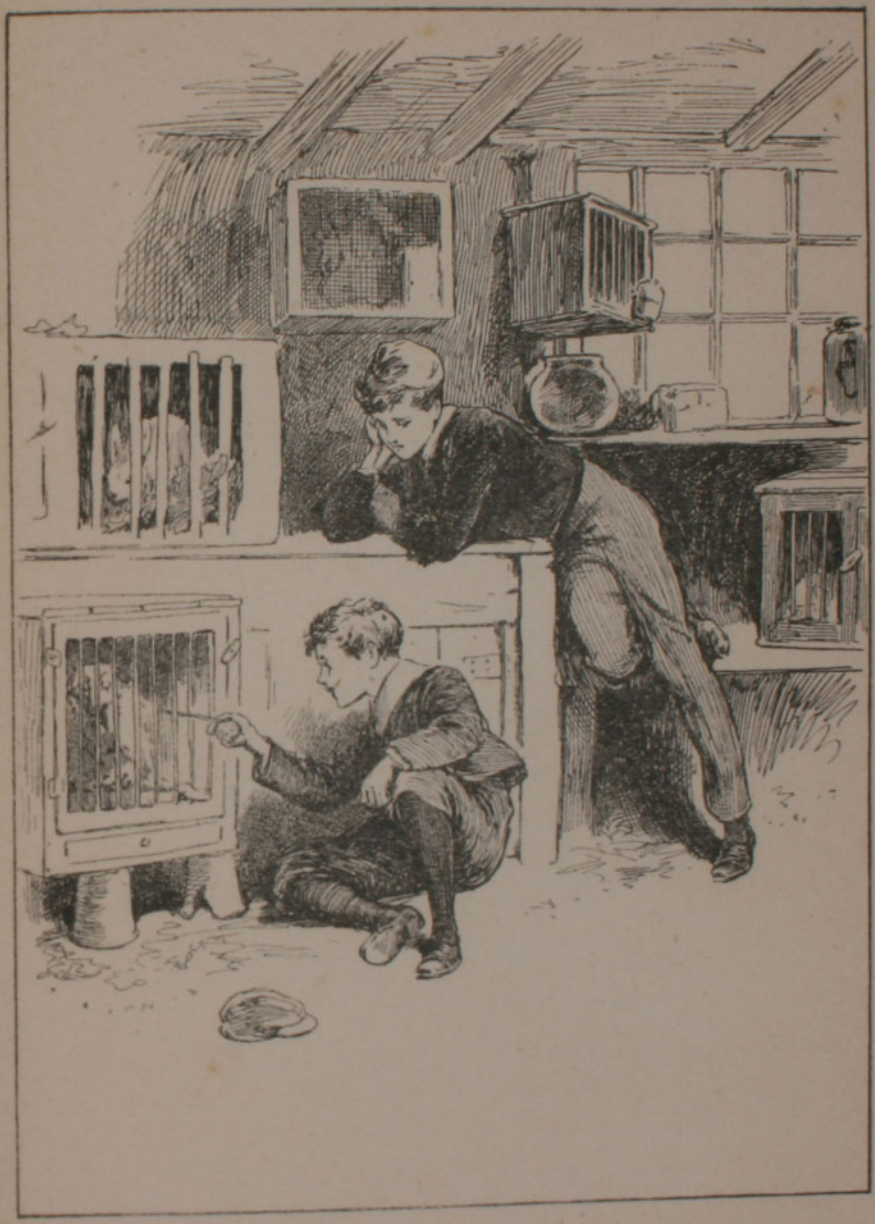
"If it's nonsense, mum, I'm sorry, but eyes are eyes, and I can only believe what I saw with mine."

"If it *was* anything, it was one of the boys playing you a trick," Mrs. Swift answers. "At any rate, say nothing about it to any one but me."

"Very well, mum, but if I'm took all on a non-plush, scream I shall, so I can't promise what I shall do."

"I have no doubt it will not happen again," and Mrs. Swift shuts the door as Sarah goes down the other way.

"I wonder who's been frightening Sally," says Jim. "She's a good old soul, but as easily scared as a rabbit. And that reminds me—come and look at the pets."



MACKLIN AND JIM GO TO LOOK AT THE PETS.

Macklin is willing, so they go to a shed in the playground where a number of wire cages are fixed against the wall. This term the collection is of a very miscellaneous character. An owl, a hedgehog, white mice, guinea-pigs, rabbits, a bantam hen, a pair of doves, some toads, lying torpid under some dead leaves (these last the pets of a lazy boy who chose them because they would require no attention all the winter), a lizard (kept for the same reason), some white rats, and a squirrel.

Some terrible scenes are reported to have taken place owing to this variety, some of the animals having been found feasting on their neighbours. It was also said—and has never been contradicted—that the owner of the mice frequently bartered whole families of their frequent and numerous progeny to the owner of the owl, for purposes of diet, and Garth had been heard to remark that if all the pets could eat each other it would be a very good thing.

Jim and Macklin have not been out long before the bell rings, and when they come back into the schoolroom there stands Mr. Allen looking gravely round at the boys.

"Some one has been into the larder this afternoon and taken away one of the pies that were prepared for dinner to-morrow. Can any one explain this? I find it hard to think that any boy in this house could steal like a common thief, yet I must ask if none of you know of this?"

There is silence, then Garth answers, "No, sir," and a murmur of "no" goes round the room.

Mr. Allen turns away saying, "There *must* be some mistake," when Mr. Robinson comes in to report that a loaf of bread, some butter, and a cake are also missing—at least so says the cook.

CHAPTER VII.

VERY ODD!

ONCE again does Mr. Allen go through the formula of asking the boys if they can explain this, and neither confession nor explanation is the result. Astonishment is on every face. One boy might, perhaps, take some cake or a tart, but a pie big enough for a dozen boys, with bread and butter and a cake to match, are more than even Walton could manage. And yet when Mr. Allen goes out, every one of the older boys look at Walton, and he suddenly becomes conscious of their gaze.

"Don't look at *me!*" he says with weak indignation, "I don't know anything about it! *I* didn't do it. I should think it was most likely Elizabeth herself."

"Seized with sudden hunger after she's been here ten years. That's very probable!" says Garth contemptuously.

"Own up, Walton; didn't you grab that pie?" asks Charlie Sexton.

"At any rate you'll give us a feast," suggests Wilson, who is not sure that the chaff may not be true. "Let us share, won't you?"

"I'll make a poem about you," says Clark. "It shall begin in this way—

"When Walton took the pie,
The Cook began to cry,
Old Septimus did sigh——"

"Shut up, Clark," says Garth quickly; "it's one thing to laugh at Walton and another to say he did it. Though who else could tackle the whole of one of Bess's pies I can't imagine."

"A stray dog got in," suggests Walton feebly.

"Exactly; a nice, well-mannered beast, who eats bread with his meat and butters it first. It might be possible if the pie-dish had been left, but that has gone."

Here Mr. Littlejohn interposes.

"It is useless discussing the matter, boys, and as no one has owned to it Mr. Allen will say no more on the subject."

Jim and Percy Macklin exchange glances. The few words they heard in the passage return to their minds, and they are convinced that one of their schoolfellows has been playing practical jokes on Elizabeth and Sarah.

"You mustn't say a word," says Jim gravely.

"Of course not," replies Macklin earnestly.

Wilson is not successful in filling the air-ball with gas that evening, though he makes the attempt, but Mr. Robinson and Mr. Littlejohn are both on the alert because of the stolen pie, so he does not venture into the lower passage where the gas-jet is, and the experiment is therefore put off to another evening. As Wilson does not sleep in the lower dormitory where Jim and Walton are, but in the one exactly above theirs, the risk he runs of being caught while coming down to the gas is much greater than if he slept on the same floor.

That night, sleeping in his little room, the room that is always allotted to the Captain of the School, Garth finds himself bitterly cold. He turns and twists and tries to get himself warmer, but it is no use. In the morning he has a cold, and applies to Mrs. Swift for another blanket.

"But, my dear, you have three already, three good new ones. You can't want more!"

"Well, I only know I was awfully cold last night, Mrs. Swift, and I've been sneezing all the morning," says Garth, who certainly does look tired and heavy-eyed.

"I'll see about it," says Mrs. Swift. "You shan't be cold to-night."

On examination it is found that Garth's bed has only one blanket, so it is no wonder that the boy has caught cold. But the question as to what has become of the two blankets is not so easily solved. Every boy's bed is examined—in fact, every bed in the house, but nowhere are the missing blankets found.

This further mystery excites the boys considerably, and a scared, nervous feeling takes possession of all the maids.

"Mrs. Swift chose to laugh at me, Master Garth," says Sarah, frightened out of all discretion; "but I saw it as plain as I see you."

"Saw what, Sally?" asks Garth, amused at the woman's solemn manner.

"It isn't for me to say what it *was*, I only know that I saw it."

"But what did you see?" asks Garth impatiently.

"I was coming out of the kitchen rather sudden-like, and *it* stood there by the larder door. It was a man, Master Garth, rather a small, white-faced man. I couldn't tell his age, but his eyes were dark and looked awful. I gave a jump and called Elizabeth, but she was a minute coming, and when I turned round again it had vanished!"

"Did you look for him?" inquires Garth, deeply interested in Sarah's tale

"We looked, of course, Master Garth, up and down, high and low, but it wasn't likely we should find it."

"Why not, if he was there?"

"Because—why, bless me, sir, can't you *see* how it is? That wasn't a human man—it was—a spirit."

"A what?" asks Garth.

"A ghost, sir."

"A *ghost?*"

Sarah nods her head and wrings her hands nervously.

"I've never lived in a haunted house before," she says piteously; "and oh, dear! it's as much as I can do to bear it. Last night I heard it moving softly about. I knew what it was, but I didn't dare go and see."

To Sarah's surprise Garth sits down among the boots (for this conversation has taken place in the boot-room) and simply roars with laughter.

"Was he waving the pie in one hand and my blankets in the other?" asks Garth when he can speak. "Your ghost has a pretty good notion of how he can make himself comfortable and at home among us."

"Oh, don't, Master Garth, *pray* don't! Besides, I said to Mrs. Swift that I wouldn't tell any of you; but I thought I could trust you, sir, being the head of the school and captain and all that."

When Garth has recovered from his laughter, he goes out into the kitchen passage and makes Sarah tell him exactly what happened, and where she stood, and what places they searched.

"You looked in the lift, of course," says Garth, but after considering, Sarah feels very sure that the lift was forgotten.

"That is where he was, then, depend upon it. He knows how to work it and got away in that manner. It's one of the boys, Sally—it *must* be—and I'll try to find out which it is."

"I wish I could think it, sir, but there isn't one of the boys has eyes like *that*—so bright and hollow-like and dark."

"Painted, probably, to take you in and prevent you from recognising him. Don't say you've told me anything, and I'll see what I can do."

Garth goes off to his own room, and sitting on the foot of his bed considers for a few moments what he had better do next. Among all the boys nearer his own age there is none on whom he can depend as he can upon Jim, and he therefore decides that he must have Jim for his confederate and ally. Besides, there is no other boy of whom he is so absolutely certain that he is not the culprit, or indeed in the plot, if more than one are concerned in it, which seems exceedingly likely.

That afternoon, therefore, Garth may be seen in the playground, walking up and down with Jim in deep and animated conversation.

"You've given Jim the sack, so he's taken up with the Captain," says Wilson to Walton.

"Jim is friends with most of the boys," says Walton, a little regretfully.

"No one's enemy but his own," says Wilson, who has heard this saying before, and now repeats it rather grandly.

"His *own!* Not he. He knows on which side his bread is buttered," says Sam Moss.

"The 'cutest boy in the school, sir," remarks Fred Clark, who reads American books and admires the style. "Garth

has sort of froze to him lately. By-the-bye, Walton, have you finished that pie yet? Isn't it getting rather high and the crust a trifle mouldy?"

"About as mouldy as your jokes, Clark," says Jim's voice behind them. He has come up unobserved, and now joins in unexpectedly. "And about that pie—Garth wishes me to let you all know that he does not mean to let this drop. He intends to find out who took the pie and his blankets, and Sexton has just been telling us that he has missed half-a-crown from his bedroom locker. Something must be done to put a stop to this sort of thing, and he's going to do it."

"Three cheers for Garth if he does!" shouts Crofts, and the other boys join in, but the voices suddenly die away as Sexton remarks thoughtfully, "It's all very well—but I don't see in the least how he's going to do it!"

"Well, that's Garth's message, so if any one feels uneasy he had better walk up and say so," says Jim calmly. "He hopes you're all prepared now, so that you won't think he hasn't given fair warning."

"Spoken like a true herald," says Clark theatrically; "only it reminds me of Original Poems—

> "'There was one little Jim,
> 'Twas reported of him,
> It will be to his lasting disgrace
> That he never was seen——'"

But Jim only laughs and goes off to join Garth, who is making signs to him.

CHAPTER VIII.

A GAS BALLOON.

A WEEK has now passed since the pie was taken, and nothing has been discovered as to the thief. At first Garth had believed that the stolen goods would be found in some out-of-the-way corner; but as nothing has turned up, he begins, very unwillingly, to think that one of the boys must have taken the pie, cake, and bread and butter for his own eating. The blanket theft is incomprehensible, but Sexton's half-crown looks bad; and Garth, after some consideration, makes up his mind that Wilson is the chief culprit, but that Walton, and possibly others, are also concerned in the matter.

Jim is indignant, and all but declines to help Garth when he hears this view of the case; but, as Garth points out to him that the best way of proving his friend's innocence is to find out who is really guilty, Jim consents to remain as aide-de-camp.

Wilson has been unlucky in his attempts to fill the ball with gas; but to-night he decides to make one more trial; therefore, as soon as the house is quiet, he takes the shrivelled india-rubber case to be filled, and steals out into the passage.

He runs many risks in so doing. The only gas-jet that he can reach is in the lower passage, and to get there he has to go down the stairs, past Garth's door (knowing that Garth will report him without compunction if he sees him).

close to the door where Mr. Robinson and Mr. Littlejohn spend their evening, and with the possibility of meeting Mrs. Swift at any moment.

Wilson feels like a hero as he creeps down to the gas, turns it out, and wishes to fill the ball as quickly as possible.

This cannot be done all at once, as the burner is far too hot, and Wilson has to wait in the darkness, shivering with cold, while the "tiresome thing" slowly cools enough for him to put on the flabby airless ball. When this is once done, it fills grandly, as Wilson, now accustomed to the darkness, can just manage to see, and he is so much absorbed in his occupation that he does not dream that Garth is standing at his door, which has been left a little open.

Garth watches for a few moments, then goes back to bed, and Wilson fills the ball, until it is as tight as possible. It is not easy, more particularly with hardly any light, to take the ball off the gas burner without letting some of the gas escape from it; but Wilson is as deft with his fingers as a girl, and manages to secure it with a silk thread before there has been any considerable escape.

Of course there is some smell of gas, and the light is out, Wilson having no matches to relight it; but he flies back to the dormitory with his now unwieldy charge, and with a murmured, "I've done it!" puts the ball into a large bandbox under the bed, and getting into bed, is soon sleeping the sleep supposed to belong exclusively to innocence and virtue.

Garth hears him go, and comes to look after him, but seeing nothing, stands there in deep thought.

What is Wilson going to do with that air-ball? Is it a mere fancy of the prevailing craze for such balls, or has it

anything to do with other plans? Garth is a young detective and he is ambitious. Mr. Allen has told him more than once that he shirks his responsibilities as Captain of the School. This time he means to make his grand *coup*, and show that he can do more than Mr. Allen and the masters combined.

He therefore goes back to his room, and returning with a box of matches, lights the gas.

He is not many seconds too soon, for Mr. Robinson, coming into the passage, sees him standing there.

"What is it, Garth?" he says gently, wondering if the boy is walking in his sleep.

"I thought I heard one of the boys, sir, so I came to see."

"Oh! all right; I'll have a look round," and Mr. Robinson goes away, to find everything quiet, and congratulate himself on the fact that the boys really *do* mean to behave better than they did.

When Garth and Jim meet in the playground, Garth says casually—

"Wilson was in the passage last night."

"Yes, filling the air-ball; I saw him," answers Jim promptly, and Garth laughs at his own failure to bring Wilson under Jim's suspicion.

"You have as many eyes as a spider," says Garth; "then perhaps you can tell me what they are going to do with that ball now they *have* filled it?"

"I don't know; I haven't asked, and they don't tell me. But why didn't you report Wilson?"

"Because"—Garth pauses; he finds it difficult to put his motives into words, or rather such words as will not sound strangely egoistical—"I thought I'd wait and see. There's

no great harm in filling that ball, and they couldn't do it in the day, because of the gas being turned off at the meter."

"You'd have reported *me*," laughs Jim.

"Perhaps I should," answers Garth, and walks off, wondering at Jim's extraordinary powers of observation.

The gas-ball delights all beholders. It is fastened to a reel of strong silk, and floats up higher than the roof of the house. Even the masters come and look at it, and Mr. Allen remarks that it is a pretty toy.

"But I wonder where they got the gas from," he adds, after a moment's reflection.

Happily for Garth, he is known to have no great friendship for Walton or love of air-balls, otherwise when Mr. Robinson remembers seeing him in the passage he might himself have been the suspected one. But Mr. Robinson, knowing all this, answers that it was probably filled in the passage, as Garth had heard some boys about last night and came out to see; but no one had been reported.

"It is a small matter, but I hope they will not do it again," says Mr. Allen. "Gas is a dangerous plaything, and boys are careless. I hope they will not do it again. I shall speak to Garth about it."

Later in the day, Wilson has a happy thought. He does not sleep in the same dormitory as Walton but in the room above, as our readers may perhaps remember; and it occurs to him that the balloon might be a means of communication after they have gone to bed.

It would be noiseless and safe if only the window can be managed quietly enough. The lower sash is barred outside to prevent boys from climbing or falling out, and the upper

CHAPTER IX.

WHO ATE THE CAKE?

"WE *sent* the cake."

"Oh! *did* you? Well, we never got it."

"But the message?"

"Didn't get that either."

"You answered it!"

"We *didn't!* Come now, Walton, we're not shamming, so you needn't try that game."

"No more am I! I sent up cake and it went, and I sent a message to ask if it was good, and you answered "awful," so we sent up more cake, and more after that, three or four lots, and it all *went.*"

"That's nonsense. Where did it go to?—unless it dropped."

"It couldn't drop; besides there was the *answer* to the message."

"Show it, if you expect me to believe."

But the paper, being of no value, has not been kept; and Wilson jeers in unbelief.

It is hard to be doubted by one's enemies, it is bitter to be disbelieved by one's friends. Walton turns away in intense mortification as Wilson says, laughing: "I suppose you ate it all yourself and wish to make believe that you sent us some. It's like a boy who could eat a whole pie, and——" but Walton has fled, and Jim stands in his place.

"What were you saying about the pie? It seems to me, Wilson, that you know too much about it yourself."

"*I?* That's good! How do you make it out?"

"Well, you seem so particularly anxious to fix the blame on Walton that I was beginning to think that you must know something about it."

"Well, I don't, but it makes one cross to be asked if one has liked cake that one hasn't ever seen."

"Last night's cake? Didn't it get to you?"

"Not a bit of it!" and Wilson again explains how Mrs. Swift was in the dormitory and prevented them from opening the window.

"That's odd," says Jim. "I saw the cake go up and the message, and the answer that came back. Walton laughed over the spelling."

"What was it?"

"'O-R-F-U-L-L!' It was thought to be your joke."

"I might have made a joke if I'd got the cake," says Wilson ruefully; "as it is, I don't understand it at all, unless you're all humbugging me," and with that he walks off rather out of temper.

Jim duly reports to Garth what has happened, and the Captain is as puzzled as the rest; but as he wishes to fathom the mystery, he will not interfere to prevent any further experiments with the balloon.

It is with a thrill of excitement that the boys prepare for bed on the following night. Walton has some sponge-cake left, and all is in readiness for another trial. There is also the advantage of a clear night, with a moon shining brightly

on that side of the house, so that as the ball goes up it casts a black shadow on the wall.

Both windows are open, and this time all will go well.

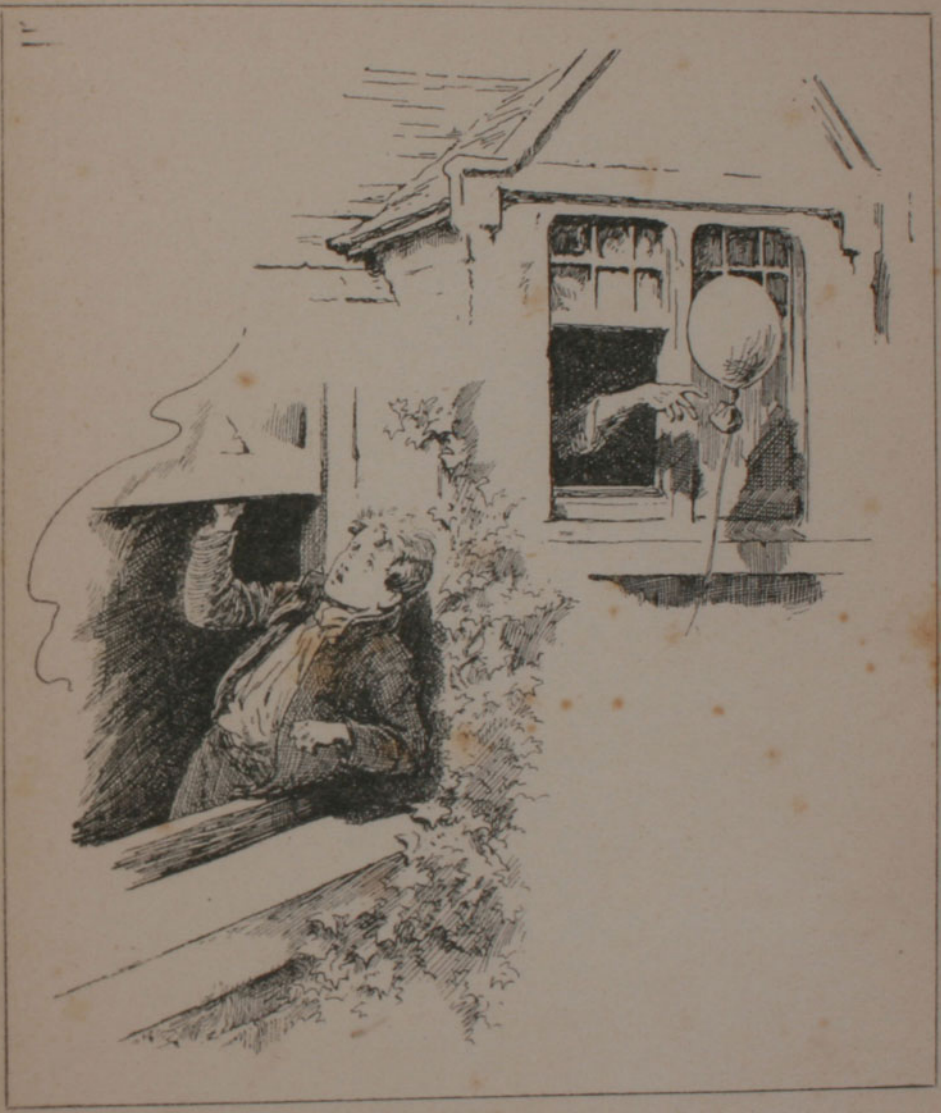
Walton, at the suggestion of the sharper-witted Wilson, has tied one end of the long thread to the bolt of the window, so that in case of an alarm, the balloon should still be safe. This is fortunate, as just at the critical moment, Walton, who is a clumsy boy, lets the silk drop from his fingers, and the ball, with its precious freight of sponge-cake, slips past the upper dormitory and sails up till it floats even with one of the attic windows high up under the eaves.

Walton leans out to see what has become of it, but he is not prepared for what he *does* see. The attic window is open, and a long, thin arm comes out, secures the piece of cake, and releases the balloon.

Walton gives a start of terror and cracks a pane of glass, but there is no time for investigating the matter, for Lorton (a new boy who has been put to watch) suddenly gives a warning signal, and Walton has to shut down the window, as far as he can, and fly back to his bed, his hands shaking and knees almost failing him in his fear.

Mr. Littlejohn looks in a moment later, but all is quiet, and he goes into his own room, where he remains long enough for most of the boys to have fallen asleep before he comes out with the book he has been seeking. To Walton, however, sleep does not come so easily. Long after Mr. Littlejohn has come up for the last time, does the terrified boy watch the crack of light beneath the door, and can hardly repress a cry when that friendly glimmer is suddenly extinguished.

He lies quaking under the bed-clothes, half smothered,



THE MYSTERIOUS HAND.

wholly wretched. He thinks of every dreadful story he has ever heard—not a wise proceeding under the circumstances, but reason has lost her control, and imagination is rampant in the boy's brain.

He listens—as who with nerves excited has not?—to a dull, muffled, thumping noise. He holds his breath and hears it plainer. It is like a step at the far end of the corridor. The step quickens, grows louder, louder and quicker, but still muffled, and Walton—with the feeling that something unknown and terrible is approaching him in the darkness—gives a sudden, wild scream of terror.

In an instant every boy is awake, and Mr. Littlejohn's voice is heard asking what is the matter. But Walton is unable to answer, and can only gasp, "Oh! Oh! Oh!" to all that is said to him.

"Shut up!" growl one or two of the boys; "do let us sleep while we may."

But Mr. Littlejohn, who is nothing if not kindly, comes in with a light.

"What is the matter? Hush, Walton, don't make that noise, you will rouse the whole house. You have had a bad dream, I daresay."

"Oh! hush, *please* hush, and LISTEN!" says Walton, with a wild stare, that convinces Mr. Littlejohn that the boy is still dreaming; however, he kindly waits a moment as requested.

"Don't you hear footsteps?" asks Walton in a ghastly whisper.

There is another pause as every one listens intently.

"I hear nothing," says Mr. Littlejohn soothingly; "come, my boy, lie down, and let me straighten you a little, for you

seem to have rolled yourself up in a wonderful way. No wonder you have had a nightmare."

Walton's expression changes suddenly to a very shame-faced one, and he meekly lies down, so that he is supposed to have now woke up for the first time.

The master with clumsy, but kindly, hands does his best to make the clothes lie straight, and leaves the boy, as he hopes, to sleep.

Happily, sleep does come to Walton more quickly than his former terrors might have led a casual observer to expect —but then the casual observer would not know that during that moment of silence in Mr. Littlejohn's reassuring presence, Walton had made the grand discovery that the muffled foot-steps were nothing more dreadful than the terrified beats of his own heart, that had quickened and grown more audible to him as his fears increased.

It is this discovery that makes him so humble when in the morning the boys jeer at him, one or two even suggesting that it was the pie disagreeing with him that had produced nightmare, and other remarks of the same kind where ill-nature is mistaken for wit. But the boy who proves himself most unfeeling is Wilson, his late friend and partner. He is not only angry at the loss of the cake, but insists that Walton has been playing tricks on him. Even when the terrifying explanation is given, he will only shout with laughter and talk about grains of salt to be taken with the cake as well as the pie, asking, finally, whether Walton really expects him to believe such a cock-and-bull story, and walking off in a state of righteous indignation at its being supposed he is such a fool.

The balloon, which has been left floating outside the window,

is confiscated by Garth, for Walton is far too nervous to touch it. Jim, therefore, draws it in, and shuts the window as usual, and, when he is gone to take the ball to Garth, Walton begins to sadly consider that he has made a poor exchange in the matter of friendship.

Jim's honest kindliness is worth—even when shared with Geoff—all the solemn protests of everlasting friendship that Wilson has made to the silly, jealous boy, and Walton has no reason to change his opinion during the next few days, when Jim's unpretending affection shields him more than once from Wilson and his followers, who would fain have enjoyed a game of "Hunt the Badger," with Walton for badger and themselves as the dogs. Walton has no wit to protect him from their teasing questions, and badgered he would certainly have been but for Jim, who, having rescued him, does not wait for a word of thanks.

CHAPTER X.

GHOSTS AND OTHER CURIOSITIES.

"WHAT'S all this about Walton's seeing a ghost?" asks Garth a few days later.

"Some of Wilson's rubbish, I should think," answers Jim; "he's awfully angry with Walton, because he never got any of the cake."

"I wonder how Walton got that cake?" muses Garth; "I've stopped John Button's bringing anything, and William wouldn't, nor Sally; nor—any of them, I believe."

Jim remains discreetly silent.

"Do you know?" asks Garth; but he does not repeat the question, for Jim is walking away as if the conversation was closed.

"Look here," says Garth, with a hand on the younger boy's shoulder: "you never bought anything yourself, did you?"

"Never since my surprise party," says Jim with a laugh.

"Well then,"—Garth hesitates, and Jim flushes hotly.

"If you want to know, ask Wilson or Walton, or some one else," he says shortly; "if it's your business to find out, it isn't mine to act as your spy."

"All right, my son!" says Garth good-temperedly, "but you needn't defend yourself until you are attacked. I'm not a reformer, and have no ambition to regenerate the school.

It's good enough for me, and I've often bought *tuck* myself —hundreds of times. What I *was* going to ask, when you broke off the thread of my discourse, as Sep would say, was simply this: have you seen Job Wright about lately?"

"He lives in the neighbourhood," says Jim with a laugh.

"No dodging! Have you seen him, Jim?"

"Yes."

"What does he come for?"

"No good."

"Certainly; but do you think he stole that pie?"

"I shouldn't be surprised at his doing such a thing," says Jim, "but I don't see how he could have taken this one. Besides, your blankets; I can't make that out at all!"

"But Wilson declares that Walton says he has seen a ghost. Now, Sally says the same, and sticks to it. I don't believe in ghosts myself; but there may be some one acting ghost, and why not Job Wright?"

But Jim shakes his head.

"Job's a bad lot; but he couldn't do it, clever as he may be. Perhaps we may find out in time, because only this morning Bess was lamenting a piece of cold beef that vanished after supper last night. Odd, isn't it?"

"It's disgusting! What has Walton told you?"

"Very little. He's in a blue fright if you mention the subject; so I wouldn't torment him. He gets enough of that from Wilson and his lot. But he's awfully nervous, and squeals if any one says Bo! in the dark. Sexton has tried it once or twice, but it isn't fair, and I've put a stop to it. I believe —but this may only be Wilson's version—that Walton has told them that ghosts don't eat as a rule, so this one must be

a vampire. I'm not as learned in ghosts as all that, but I am willing to be instructed, and I should like to catch this vampire very much."

At this point the conversation is interrupted, and the boys separate.

Behind the fives-court there is a hedge, looking into the road. In that remote and sheltered spot three boys are standing. They are Walton, Wilson, and Sam Moss, and they are evidently waiting for some one. A soft whistle is heard in the road, which all along the playground and cricket field has been dug out, and therefore runs considerably lower than the bank and hedge on each side. Wilson throws over a piece of whipcord, and there is a pause; then slowly and carefully something heavy is hauled up and lifted over the hedge. The cord goes down once more, and a far lighter packet comes up, and is given to Walton with one expressive word from Wilson of an uncomplimentary nature, having a reference to a well-known domestic animal, famous for its large and omnivorous appetite.

"Well, what's in *your* parcel?" asks Walton, hoping to turn the tables on Wilson.

"Nothing to eat," says Wilson shortly; "so it won't interest *you*. Want the string, Moss?"

"No, thanks. I—I'm waiting to speak to Job. He promised to change half-a-crown for me."

This plausible reason for consulting Job is smiled upon by Wilson, and stared at by Walton; but, on the principle of doing as they would be done by, they both go off and leave him to have his interview alone. Wilson smuggles his parcel up to the bedroom, and Walton regales himself, and

any boy who will join him, with the cake and tarts that come from his bag.

Moss, left alone with Job Wright, who is a big boy with an evil expression, produces the half-crown and asks for a shilling. Job, from the road, answers that he hasn't a copper, for Farmer Burton won't take less than two-and-six.

The facts of the case are that Sam Moss, having stolen out of bounds one day, had met Job Wright with a gun. The offer to fire it off was too tempting to be resisted, and Sam had shot two of Farmer Burton's white fantail pigeons that were airing themselves by a flight round the fields. The shot was an absolute fluke, as Sam had no skill, and had scarcely taken aim; but the pigeons were dead, and Sam's shoulder black and blue for a week afterwards, as the recoil all but knocked him down.

Job had pocketed the pigeons, kindly promising to arrange matters with Mr. Burton, and had brought word yesterday that if Moss paid one-and-sixpence, the farmer would say nothing more about the pigeons.

Job had undertaken to bring change for the half-crown, as Moss had no wish to ask for change in the house, for fear of being questioned. But here was Job, and no shilling with him.

"I'm very sorry," said Job, concealing a grin; "but you see it was in this way. Just when I thought I'd settled it with Mr. Burton, in comes his little girl to say they were her pet pair that had been shot—both of 'em; and they with a nest of young ones just hatched."

"Oh, Job!"

"Ah! it is 'Oh, Job!'" says the boy mockingly. "Well,

out flew the farmer again, and now nothing will satisfy him but half-a-crown."

"It's all I've got," says Moss ruefully; "my father won't give me much pocket-money, and I've been fined once or twice. Here it is. You're *sure* it's all right now?"

Job caught the coin that was tossed over the hedge, and replied in a voice that was cautiously doubtful—

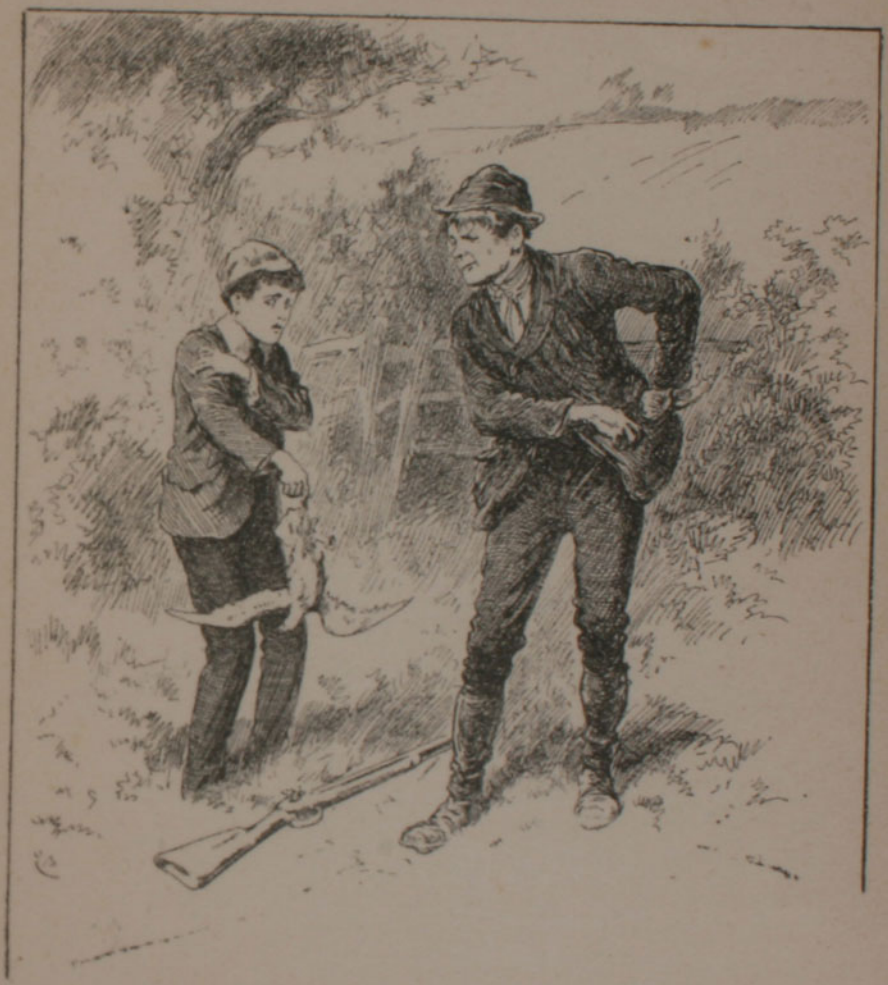
"I'll do the best I can for you, sir; but, you see, Mr. Burton's a terrible hasty, hot-tempered man, so there's no knowing. But depend on me, and I'll do the best I can."

Moss gives a sigh, and murmuring, "Thank you, Job," walks away in a depressed and thoughtful manner.

That afternoon the whole house is more or less excited by the arrival of a big case—the long-promised box of curiosities from Fabius. Mr. and Mrs. Allen are both greatly pleased with all the contents of the box; and after tea Mr. Allen invites Garth, and several other boys who knew Fabius—Jim being of course among the number—to come and see the wonderful things that have been sent from Australia.

Mr. Allen also reads them a few words from one of Fabius's letters, in which he says that Mr. Sedges has suggested that a school museum might be a good thing, and has therefore added some valuable and curious things to the collection. Fabius, therefore, hopes his father may be able to find some place for the things where they will be safe, and also where the boys can see and admire them.

There are also several small presents, one for Garth, and one for Jim, and a whole collection all to himself, in a small box, for Geoff Harrington, Fabius's particular friend, which will have to be forwarded either to Blank or to Berry Green.



"The pigeons were dead, and Sam's shoulder black and blue for a week afterwards."

There is, moreover, a brooch, made out of a small nugget of gold, for Mrs. Swift, which she shows to every one in the house, with great pride and affection, and it remains one of her best-loved treasures.

It would be impossible to tell of all the wonderful things Fabius and Mr. Sedges have sent between them, and the evening passes very quickly for them all, so that when the prayer-bell rings no one can believe it is so late.

"Had a good time?" asks Walton, as Jim returns.

"Capital!"

"Seen all the treasures?"

"Most of them. There are such numbers."

"Lots of gold nuggets?" asks Wilson, for whom Australia is, in imagination, one huge gold mine.

"Heaps!" says Garth with boyish exaggeration; and then Mr. Allen comes in to read prayers.

CHAPTER XI.

JIM'S ENCOUNTER.

WALTON is sitting up in bed, rubbing his cheek in a melancholy fashion, and groaning now and then, when Jim suddenly wakes up and hears him.

"What's the matter, old man?" asks Jim sleepily.

"*Such* toothache! Oh! it feels as if this one was being screwed out of my head."

"Had any sweets to-day?"

"Only a jam tart—or two," answers Walton.

"You promised, once upon a time, that you wouldn't waste your money like that," says Jim. "Remember what my father said to you about it one holidays. But I'm not going to preach; the toothache is doing that. It isn't late, for it's just this moment struck eleven. Shall I go to Mrs. Swift for some tincture?"

"Oh! *will* you? Thank you *so* much!" moans Walton, holding his face in both hands, as if it might fall off if not kept in its place. "You're awfully good, Jim, and it's so cold, too! Do wear shoes, and put on an ulster."

Jim has no intention of doing otherwise on such an errand, and he goes out into the passage well protected from the cold. As Jim has said, it is not late; but the boys do not know that Mr. Littlejohn went to bed rather early, and is sound asleep in the next room.

The gas is still alight in Mrs. Swift's bedroom, and the door is ajar, so that Jim looks in, after knocking once or twice, and sees that she is not there. Then he thinks he could go into her sitting-room, which is a little further down the passage, and see if she is there, and if not he knows the tincture kept for the boys' toothache is in the cupboard there. The gas is also alight in here; but Mrs. Swift herself is not to be found, so Jim climbs up to the cupboard, and is just going to put his hand on the bottle, when the gas is turned off at the meter, and after a flicker the flame sinks and goes out, leaving Jim perched on a chair, with his hand among many bottles of various sorts and sizes. He gets down as well as he can, and begins to feel his way out of the room, when he hears her go past the door. Shall he call? It may startle her or wake some one, and before he has made up his mind she is gone, and the light of her candle gives a last flicker as it disappears, and the door shuts softly behind her.

Jim gropes his way carefully to the door, knocking once or twice against unexpected corners; but at last the door is reached, and Jim stands again in the passage. Facing him is the door of the lift, used for bringing up the boys' clothes, coals, and anything that will spare trouble to the maids.

This door is now open, and there stands before Jim the figure of a man, small and thin, with a strange white face, and dark hollow eyes. He carries a small brass hand lamp, and seems as much startled on seeing Jim as Jim is to see him; but of this the boy has hardly time to judge, his heart being most unpleasantly agitated. A moment later the figure lifts its right hand; a line of fire flashes across Jim's sight,

and he drops without a word, and lies across the passage stunned.

Had any one been watching, they would have seen the figure step hastily over the prostrate boy, enter Mrs. Swift's sitting-room, and, after gathering up all that has been left from her supper, return silently to the lift and disappear.

It is not long before Jim moves and opens his eyes in the darkness. It takes him a little time to find out where he is, and why he is not in bed. But at last he gets up rather unsteadily, and feels his way to Mrs. Swift's door, where he knocks.

That lady is attired in a red dressing-gown, and has been brushing her long grey hair, which hangs over her shoulders as she opens the door.

"Jim!" she exclaims, considerably startled, "what is it? What *have* you done to yourself?"

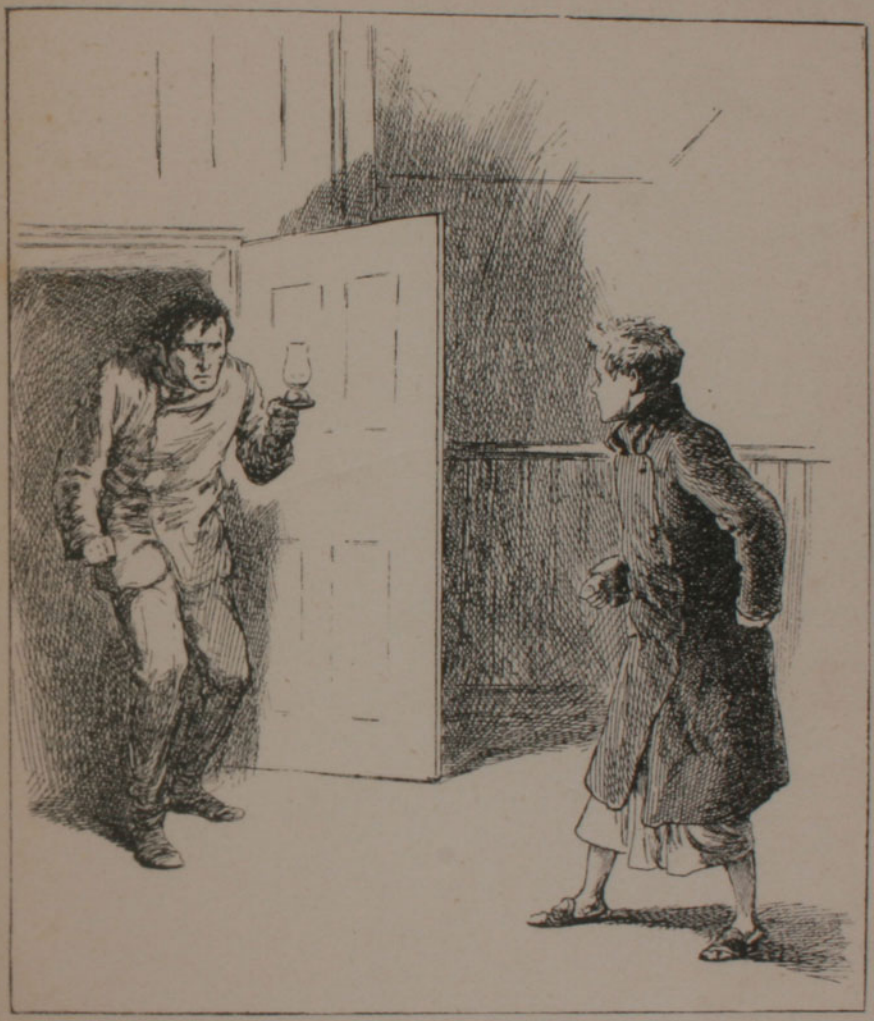
"I was coming to you—I forget what for—I can't remember things——"

"Hush! hush! Don't cry," answers Mrs. Swift soothingly. "Here, my dear, lie down on my bed, and let me put this shawl and quilt over you. Keep quiet while I put some ointment to your eye."

Silently, and with gentle hands, she dresses the bruise above his eye, which is quickly turning purple; then telling him to lie still, she goes to the dormitory to find out what has happened. All is quiet; only Walton still sits up in bed holding his face, and drawing long breaths of pain.

"Oh! *thank* you," he says, on seeing her. "Did you bring the stuff for my tooth?"

"No. Were you wanting it?"



"There stands before Jim the figure of a man."

"Yes. Jim said he'd tell you. He's been a long time. Where is he?"

"I left him in my room. Did he say he would ask me to come to you?"

"Yes. Please bring the stuff before my head comes *quite* off!" groans poor Walton.

Not much enlightened by this explanation, Mrs. Swift brings the bottle of tincture, and a few drops on cotton-wool soon makes Walton feel as if life was bearable once more. She then returns to the boy, who lies very still on her bed, just as when she left him.

"Does your head ache, dear?"

"Rather. It feels funny, but not very bad."

"Can you tell me how you hurt it?"

But Jim cannot remember, and a distressed look in his face makes her once more forbid him to try.

"Never mind, dear. Go to sleep where you are. I will shade the candle, and it will not be in your way."

For some time she feels very anxious about the boy; but after a little while he falls asleep, and when she goes to look at him it is a comfort to find he is not feverish, and only the bruise remains to tell the tale. In the morning Jim wakes to find himself in Mrs. Swift's room, and she is standing beside him already dressed.

"Now, Jim," she says, "you have had a good night. Can you remember what happened to you? Did you tumble downstairs or down the lift?"

The word "lift" brings back to Jim's mind the recollection of what he saw last night, and, as well as he can, he tells Mrs. Swift about it.

"Walton and Sarah have talked about a ghost, and if that's one, I've seen it. But ghosts don't usually use their fists to such purpose. Oh! I say, Mrs. Swift, I'm going to have an awful black eye—a real stunner!"

"It was a stunner last night," says Mrs. Swift, half-laughing, "and you were lucky that it did not hit you more on the temple."

"Well," sighs Jim, "it's spoilt my beauty for some time, and what I'm to say to the boys I don't know. You've asked me not to tell them what I've seen; but I must tell Garth, please, even if no one else is to know."

"Very well, you may tell Garth; but I don't want the boys frightened. Of course, I shall speak to Mr. Allen about it."

A howl from at least a dozen boys greets Jim's reappearance at breakfast, for he has been let off early school; but he carries off the chaffing with a high hand, and gives back as good as he gets. Only once he falters, when Mr. Robinson, catching sight of him, asks—

"Where did you get that black eye, Jim? Been in the wars?"

"Please don't ask, sir," conscious that many ears are on the alert.

"What, *fighting?* Oh, Jim, Jim!" and the master passes on, leaving him indignant and helpless.

But the suggestion is at once taken up by the others.

"Who did you fight, Jim? Did you let him off easy? He *has* punished you, and no mistake! When was it, and where?"

"Fighting! why, he *can't* fight! He saw a ghost last

night most likely, and hit his head against a post in running away," says Wilson.

Jim's nerve is a little shaken by the effect of the blow and the yet unravelled mystery, so that he suddenly turns white.

"I *said* so!" exclaims Wilson in triumph. "Just look at him, you fellows. Clark, can't you write us a song about it?"

"I'll try," answers Clark with becoming modesty, and later Jim is greeted with these words, that have been fitted by Wilson to the tune of "There's nae luck aboot the house"—

"Jim saw a ghost
Upon a post,
And straightway called 'Oh. my!'
And then the ghost
Caught up a post,
And blacked poor Jimmy's eye."

"Jim, come with me," says Garth suddenly, not liking the expression of the boy's face. "Don't listen to their nonsense. How can you mind it? You don't care generally when they tease you, and they've often said worse than this rubbish of Clark's."

"You don't understand," says Jim, with a long breath; "in fact, I don't understand either, though I've been thinking of nothing else all the morning. I shouldn't mind about it if what they're singing wasn't nearly true."

CHAPTER XII.

OUT OF BOUNDS.

"*True!*" exclaims Garth.

Jim nods. "I've seen Walton's friend, the ghost," he says, with an attempt at his usual careless manner, "and he gave me this black eye—not with a post, as Clark says, but with his clenched fist. It's *true*, Garth; it is, indeed, though I can hardly believe it myself."

"The ghost?"

"Yes."

"Walton's vampire?"

"Yes."

"Fiddlesticks!"

"Exactly the remark I should have made yesterday," says Jim. "Mind, I have Mrs. Swift's leave to tell you this, but you *only*. You see I wouldn't promise not to tell you."

"Good boy! Fire away," says Garth, thinking he is to hear the history of some dream.

Jim's story is now possible to follow, for his memory has returned as the stunning effect of the blow passes away, and later, when Garth goes to Walton, he finds that all the part relating to him is perfectly accurate. But, as he listens now, he cannot make up his mind to believe, even though Jim tells the story.

"What did *you* think? *Was* it a ghost?" he asks, as Jim pauses.

"Certainly not," says Jim promptly. "I don't know much about ghosts, as I said once before, but I never heard of one that used its fists. And yet it seems even more possible that it should be a ghost than anything else."

"It is very strange. I wonder what Sep thinks about it."

So does Mrs. Swift when she goes to tell her tale to the master—but he soon stops her.

"Really, Mrs. Swift, this is absurd! It must be clear to any one that the boy was asleep when Walton sent him for you, and that he went without knowing what he did. Of course he fell or knocked himself. There is nothing strange that I can see in all this."

"Certainly not, if that is the view you take of it," replies Mrs. Swift doubtfully.

"What other view do you consider possible?"

"I must confess I have been wondering whether there is not something more in it."

"Can you seriously believe such a thing?—believe that Jim Harrington met a ghost walking in the passage, and it knocked him down?"

"No, not *that;* but——"

She pauses, laughing, and Mr. Allen breaks in—"I am glad to hear you say so, because I have always thought you were particularly clear-headed and sensible, which I must have doubted if you had believed Jim's dream to be reality. You were quite right to prevent his telling the boys, for I have no doubt that to him it was a very vivid dream, and, as some boys are nervous and credulous, it is better to keep on the safe side, for fear of a panic at bedtime among the younger ones."

"I should not think so much of it if Walton had not been frightened, and Sarah also."

"My dear Mrs. Swift," says Mr. Allen, in a somewhat decided tone, "pray, *pray* do not let us waste time in a discussion so utterly useless and trivial. The whole thing is *impossible*, and there is an end of the matter."

The best men have their weaknesses, and Mr. Allen always objects to hearing any matter talked over after he has once thoroughly made up his mind. Remembering this, Mrs. Swift says no more, and tries to persuade herself that he must be right. Tries, and *fails*, because, with a woman's "unreasonableness," she will not acknowledge the impossibility of a thing because she cannot understand or explain it.

In the meantime, matters are not going smoothly with other boys. Sam Moss has had yet another interview with Job Wright, and learns to his dismay that Mr. Burton took the half-crown, but declared he was not satisfied, as the pigeons were worth eighteenpence each if they were worth a penny. He has also threatened to call on Mr. Allen unless more money is forthcoming, and poor Moss turns sick at the thought of having to explain; a most foolish fear, as the thoughtless disobedience of breaking bounds and firing Job's gun is not nearly so serious a matter as the concealment and the falsehoods he will be obliged to tell to keep the secret from others. He is not a wise youth, for, when he feels he must have a confidant, he selects Wilson for that office, and lays the matter before him.

That young gentleman thinks seriously for a few minutes; then he says decidedly, "You must go and see this farmer. How do you know that Job is telling the truth? He isn't a

boy to be trusted with much. I never pay him until I see my things, no more does Walton, and then he's welcome to the money, but not before."

"But how can I see this Mr. Burton?"

"Don't you know where he lives?"

"Oh, yes—not far off. Just across these fields."

"Come along then, and I'll go with you, just to the gate," says Wilson, ready to join in any disobedience, and Moss prepares to follow Wilson's lead.

There are forty minutes before the tea-bell will ring, and the boys run across the fields as if for their lives, and drop down again into the road further on, near Mr. Burton's farmhouse.

It is a comfortable, tidy-looking place, and, as Sam sees the pigeons on the roof, his courage begins to fail. Wilson, however, who is well out of the difficulty, urges him on, and he rings the bell and asks for Mr. Burton, who happens to be at home.

He is not kept waiting long, as the farmer almost immediately rolls into the room—a small, round, ruddy, jolly-faced man, somewhat troubled with rheumatism in his knees, but otherwise hale and hearty, in spite of his sixty years. He greeted the boy with kindliness, and offered him some cider, which Moss—rather to his own regret—felt obliged to decline.

Then began the confession.

At first it was rather difficult to make the farmer understand, for he was just a little deaf, and in his agitation Moss could not speak above a whisper, so that for some time they were hopelessly at cross-purposes. At last, gathering courage from the fact that the farmer did not fly into a rage, as he had been led to expect, Moss drew his chair nearer and raised his

voice, so that this time everything was made clear and comfortable.

The farmer laughed loudly on hearing the whole story, calling Moss a "young radical," by which he seemed to convey some hidden meaning in the word unknown to the schoolboy, who did not feel like a politician at that moment. He also said that though he did not like to have his pigeons shot, still an accident *was* an accident, and there was no good in making mountains out of mole-hills, and for the matter of that there were too many pigeons on the place, for they did more harm than good, eating up the greens and young corn; but Bridget liked them, and said they gave life to the house, and Bridget had always had her own way, and probably would as long as she lived.

But when he heard about Job Wright and the money, he became more roused, and Moss thought he was beginning to show himself at last as the hot-tempered, indignant man described by Job Wright, when he suddenly cooled, burst out laughing, and said—

"To think of the invention of that good-for-nothing! Why, I haven't even missed the pigeons, let alone asking money for them, and, what's more, I've not a chick or child belonging to me. The pigeons are Bridget's, that's true; but she doesn't pet one more than another, and I haven't heard that she even missed them."

"Then isn't Bridget your daughter?"

At this the farmer fairly roared with laughter.

"Come in, come in, Bridget, and hear the joke!" he shouted. "This young gentleman wishes to know if you're my daughter!"

A small, active-looking woman of past fifty, with bright brown eyes and snow-white hair, came and stood in the doorway in answer to his call.

"My daughter!" shouted the farmer. "Ah! and a good daughter, son, wife, everything—she is to me, God bless her! Never a word but of kindness to a cross old fellow like me!" And the farmer laughed again, as if to call himself cross was one of the best jokes in the world.

So altogether Moss comes out of his difficulty better than he had hoped; but, before leaving, the farmer made him promise to tell the whole story to Mr. Allen, and to have no further dealings with Job.

It is easier to give up Job than to tell Mr. Allen; but Sam promises, and keeps his word.

CHAPTER XIII.

HOME-MADE RECOMMENDATIONS.

WILSON, sitting by the roadside, shuffles his feet in the loose gravel, and lets his mind wander. He is, therefore, rather startled when he finds a man at his elbow—a rather smart-looking fellow, well dressed, though a little flashy—who asks him the time, as his watch has stopped.

Wilson glances at the bright watch-chain, and answers that he does not know—he has no watch.

"Really?" says the young man; "that's very strange. Have you lost it?"

"No; I never had one to lose," says Wilson shortly.

"I asked because I have just found this one in the road. It looks a splendid watch, but it isn't going. I thought it might belong to you."

"It is not mine," says Wilson, looking at the very handsome double-case gold hunter offered for his inspection.

It has long been his ambition to own a watch. If only *he* could have found it!

"I wonder who could have lost it," he says thoughtfully.

"Well, you belong to these parts, so you'd better take it. There's sure to be a reward offered for it, and if not, why then you're the owner."

"That would be jolly," says Wilson; "but are you willing to let me have it?"

"Oh! that's easily done. You can give me—say a quid—

a pound, you know. They're sure to offer as much as that for such a handsome article, so you can't lose by it. Shall we say a quid?"

Wilson looks, longs, hesitates, and is lost.

"It's a good deal to give on the chance of being able to keep it. Suppose I hear some poor man has lost this?"

"*Poor* man! A watch of this class! I think it very probably belongs to Lord What's-his-name, who lives in this neighbourhood."

"The Earl of Rushtonbury or Lord Riversmere, do you mean?"

"Either of them may have lost it. I might go up to the Castle and ask if I had time."

"At the Manor?"

"Ah, yes! the Manor," answers the young man airily; "travelling as much as I do, one confuses names. Well, will you take it or leave it!"

"My grandfather sent me a pound for my birthday; but I haven't got it here. It's at school—at Mr. Allen's."

"Ah! really. Capital school I have always heard. If you wish to fetch the money I can wait for it, only I should be glad to have it soon—soon as convenient, you know, as I'm leaving this place in two hours."

"I have a friend in there," and Wilson points to Mr. Burton's farmhouse; "I must wait for him. Besides, I—I shouldn't like it known that I——"

"I understand—perfectly. I'll wait with you until your friend comes out, and then—I dare say there is some quiet corner where you could bring me the money. It will suit me quite as well as if you invited me in. It is rather a bore sometimes when people will be over-civil. There are times

when one likes to be quiet, and not proclaim everything one does from the house-tops, eh?"

Wilson laughs, and at this moment Sam Moss appears, very red in the face, and evidently much excited. Even the presence of a stranger cannot restrain him from exclaiming hastily, "That rascal Job! But I'll tell you later." And he suddenly looks from Wilson to the flashy young man, who bows affably, and turns to Wilson.

"The friend you were waiting for? A schoolfellow? I am glad to meet him, and hope he will not object to my walking across the field in his company. But you seem excited. You mentioned Job. May I inquire if it was the patient gentleman of that name to whom you were alluding?"

"Certainly not," says Moss, not knowing whether to feel angry or laugh.

"Glad to hear it. But perhaps I am intruding—preventing a confidential talk. I will at once retire——"

"Oh, no!" says Wilson hastily. "Come, make haste, Moss. If you've anything to tell, you may say it. This——"

"Gentleman," says the young man, with a flourish of his cane. "In these days we are all gentlemen, and have professions. Mine is—well, I will not boast, but it is one which requires great tact, delicacy, and nerve."

"Detective!" thinks Wilson at once, and wonders if he ought to buy the watch. Perhaps it is a plot to try him.

"What is your profession?" he asks.

"I am a salesman—a traveller, you understand. I travel for a great London firm. I have to push goods that may or may not be what people require—that needs tact; also to insist upon prompt payment without giving offence, which requires delicacy; and as for nerve, I've been in five railway accidents already in my travels, so it requires some courage to

continue in the same line. But what will you have when I am of such value to my employers? They say they would never be able to find such perfect honesty again. They raise my salary at every objection I make, so naturally enough I stay."

Wilson is more anxious to hear about Farmer Burton than to listen to the self-recommendation of his new acquaintance, so he turns to Moss, and asks if it is all right.

"Yes; I'm so glad I went. He's actually coming up to The Birches this evening, for Mr. Allen has promised to show the Australian things."

"Excuse me, has Mr. Allen any connection with Australia?" asks the stranger. "It is always useful in my business that I should know as much as I can, in case—— Perhaps he has land there?"

"No," says Wilson; "but his son has gone out there, and he has sent his father a box of valuable curiosities."

"Ah! it is a splendid country, Australia. I have often thought of going there myself. My father went out—free of expense; they were so glad to get valuable men into the colony at that time. Have you ever seen a nugget?"

"No; I haven't. Some came in the box; but they haven't been shown to the whole school yet, only to a few boys."

"To see gold *properly*, there should be a great many nuggets together, or one very big one. It shows off best when there is a lot."

"Garth said there were heaps of nuggets, didn't he, Wilson?—and I dare say there were, for Mr. Sedges sent lots of things, and he seems very rich. Oh! I say, it's getting late; we must hurry, or I shan't have time."

Wilson looked at the young man, who winked gaily, and they all hurried back the way they came. The flashy young gentleman remained in the road, employed in the innocent

pastime of picking a few early primroses that were showing here and there in the grass, with which he had adorned his button-hole when Wilson returned.

"Here's the money."

"All right, and here's the watch. I've put it in this wash-leather bag for safety. Don't drop it on your way. Have you got it safely? Thank you, my dear boy; I hope you will be as pleased with your bargain as I am with mine. Good-bye."

As he sprang down the bank into the road, the man gave a quick glance round, that seemed to take in the house and its surroundings, before he turned, waved his hand, and was gone. The bell clanged hoarsely above, and Wilson had only time to slip the watch into his pocket without looking at it, and go in to tea, where he contrived to sit by Moss, and hear his long-deferred tale as to how he had fared with Mr. Burton.

That evening, when the Australian curiosities are being shown to Mr. and Mrs. Burton, Mr. Allen takes the opportunity of thanking him for his kindness to Moss, and for the good advice he had given.

"Well, sir, I'm glad he's owned up honestly, as he said he would," answers the farmer, "for I should trust to his promise another time. I was brought up with the two mottoes always in my mind that my dear mother taught me from my cradle. 'Honesty is the *only* policy,' says she; 'let alone the best.' It's the only way to get on, and I've proved it many a time. That was one saying of hers. The other was, 'A lie always costs more than it's worth,' and I've found that to be the case also. I told both these mottoes to the young gentleman, and he said he'd remember them, and I hope he will, for though they're only homely English words, with no Latin or Greek in them, they may come home to him some day, and be of use to him when he may need them."

CHAPTER XIV.

BARGAINS AND OTHER MATTERS.

To return to Wilson. All through tea-time the newly acquired watch seems to be burning in his pocket, so intense is his desire to examine his treasure. Of course it will need some repairing, but that he can get done in Rushton. He will take the watch and leave it at the jeweller's next time they go into the town. He has still five shillings left—it cannot cost more than that to put it in order, and then how envious the boys will be who have been wanting watches, and how nice always to know the time—never be late any more, because——

In the midst of these enjoyable anticipations grace is said, and Wilson is free—free to take out that precious watch and admire its beauty. Then, in spite of hands almost trembling with excitement, Wilson brings it out with great care from the washleather bag in which it has been hidden. The light is not good, for Wilson cannot see it properly—at least, so it seems to him, for it does not look the same—it does not feel the same—and when, with a horrible, sickening suspicion that all is not right, Wilson, in his agitation, brings it out under the gas before all the boys, it is only too obvious that it is *not* the same.

A sudden exclamation of rage breaks from Wilson, and Garth looks up quickly.

"Order! order! Your language is unparliamentary, Wilson," calls the Captain.

"Parliament be—— Oh! I *say*, Garth, just look at this! Such a cheat—such a swindle as I never heard of!" And Wilson, too disgusted to feel proud, tells the story of the afternoon, not forgetting Sam Moss's part in it, to all the boys who happen to have assembled in the little schoolroom.

Garth listens and turns to Moss.

"What of you?" he asks.

"Oh, I'm all right!" answers the boy, with a sigh of relief to think that he *did* keep his promise to the farmer. "I went to Mr. Allen when I came back and told him all about it."

"Lucky for you you did," says Garth, laughing; "you'd have found yourself in rather a tight corner if you hadn't, with Wilson as the keeper of your secret. As for you, Wilson, how could you be so senseless as to think that a stranger would give you a valuable gold watch for one pound?"

"He said he had found it, and told me a long story about it, which I thought was all right. It *sounded* true as he told it; besides, he showed me the watch, and it was a beauty—not this *thing!*"

Garth looks at the offending article, and tries to open the case. It is not a watch at all—nothing but a dummy—a lump, with the semblance of a watch on the face and back, and the tin-like metal of which it is composed is washed over with a yellow substance, like some of the cheap tin toys. Garth pulls out his knife and cuts round the edge of the case, so that it falls apart and the contents drop out. These are some stones and a tiny bit of iron, all packed tight with dirty scraps of paper to prevent their rattling. Never was a more complete fraud.

Wilson, notwithstanding, gets no sympathy from Garth, who tells him he is properly punished for breaking bounds

and having money dealings with a perfect stranger who has introduced himself, and hopes it will be a lesson to him, with other excellent advice, to which the boy turns a deaf ear, continuing to lament over the wickedness of a world that can contain such a monster of iniquity as the perpetrator of this "confidence" trick.

At this moment Jim, who has not been present, comes in, and has to hear the story again.

"I saw that man this afternoon," says Jim. "I took a letter for Mr. Allen up to the Vicarage, and I met him in the village. He asked me if I had lost a watch, and I said, 'No,' and walked on; but he followed, and began showing it, asking if I could help him to find out to whom it belonged. I said I would take it to the Vicarage, if he liked, as then it would be safe; but he said he would make inquiries himself first, and take it to the Vicarage later if he got no trace of the owner. He made me show him which house was the Vicarage, and then I left him. He was a howling cad, and I was glad to get away from him."

"Did he offer you the watch?" asks Garth.

"No, but he said he was leaving the neighbourhood, and it was awkward for him to make inquiries, so I advised him once more to go to the Vicar, and wished him good afternoon."

"Tact, delicacy, and nerve," thinks Wilson to himself; "he is probably a thief." But he says no more, and flings the remains of the sham watch into the fire.

"Never buy a pig in a poke, Wilson," says Sexton. "If it hadn't been for that washleather bag you would have seen the difference."

"Who would have thought that Wilson would have been taken in like that!" says Walton, with a grain of malice in

his tone. "Now, if *I* had been cheated, you would all have said that it was just what you would have expected; but Wilson, who is so sharp and clever——"

"Shut up, Walton, and don't hit a fellow when he's down," says Jim, who sees that Wilson has had about as much as he can bear. "You may be in a hole yourself to-morrow, and wouldn't like to be jumped upon any more than Wilson does."

Neither Jim nor Walton little dream how soon these words are to come true.

The following day Walton meets Job Wright at the usual time, and receives a due supply of buns and cake, for which he pays, adding a consideration for Job's services, and a bun besides, which Job munches as he imparts the following information—

"This is my last visit here, for I've got a place. I'm to be a orfice boy to a genelman in Crookford, twenty miles from here. Mother found me the place, and wrote the testimonials, and I'm engaged. I begin at eight pounds a year and all found, and I'm going to-morrer."

"Oh, dear! Well, I'm glad you've got a place, and I hope you'll keep it," says Walton, wondering if he is most glad or sorry. A great temptation will be taken away, but then he will lose all chance of the good things he likes so well.

"Shan't stay if I don't like it," declares Job; and then Walton suddenly knows his own mind—hopes that he will stay, or, at any rate, that they may never meet face to face again.

This being the last time of meeting, Job insinuates that a shilling for past services would be a graceful and acceptable gift, and Walton, though he knows he has overpaid the boy all along, is not able to refuse such a bold request.

"Thank you, sir. Good-bye, sir. I wish you well, and

hope that you'll find others to serve you as faithful as I have;" and with that Job vanishes down the road.

Next morning Walton receives a letter in an unknown writing, and, on reading it, turns a ghastly colour. Jim, who goes to his rescue, has it thrust into his hand, as the wretched boy sinks on a form, unable to stand from terror.

"To MR. WALTON, Sir," (begins the letter).

"Has our messenger leaves to-morrow" (here follows the date in full), "Mr. Hicks will feel oblige if Mr. Walton will kindly settle enclose account, which as been running a long time. Unless paid by return, Mr. H. will av to apply to the master, Mr. Allen, which I shall be sorry to have to do. Mr. H. was not aware that account had been running so long, and I remain, your obedient servant,—

JOHN HICKS, *Confectioner.*

"Take it at once to Mr. Allen," says Jim, after leading Walton into the playground. "Of course, he'll punish you; but he'll be very kind and help you all the same."

"I can't, I can't!" gasps Walton; "I'll go—I'll run away—I'll get back to my mother, and she'll pay for me!"

"Tell Mr. Robinson, if you won't tell Mr. Allen," says Jim pleadingly. "Don't be so foolish, Walton; you'll get into a worse scrape, if you don't take my advice."

"I won't tell any one," says Walton, nearly crazy with fright; "I'll go——"

But Jim, with a sudden feeling that Walton must be helped in spite of himself, lays violent hands on him, and drags him towards Mr. Allen's room.

Walton is very mute, and does not resist much, so that, to the boys who happen to notice, it only appears like a friendly scuffle.

But in the passage Jim says decidedly, "If you don't choose to come, I'll go *without* you—so now!"

CHAPTER XV.

WALTON IN TROUBLE.

DRAGGING, entreating, insisting, encouraging, Jim gets Walton along somehow to the door of Mr. Allen's study, and before the miserable boy has made up his mind what he will do, Jim has knocked, and the door is suddenly opened by Mr. Allen, who stands before them in great surprise.

This is not the way in which boys generally present themselves at his study. Jim is hot and breathless; his black eye, now turning green and yellow, is still plainly visible; his hair is disordered, and his clothes rumpled in his struggles with Walton, who is in even a worse plight, and whose white, fear-stricken face is lifted to the master's with a piteous look that goes at once to his heart.

Mr. Allen lays a hand on Walton's shoulder with a reassuring touch, and asks quietly—

"What is it, boys? Have you been fighting?"

"No, sir; only, I'd rather a trouble to bring him here," answers Jim, panting. "He has got into a scrape, and he is afraid to confess; but I've promised that you'll be kind to him." And Jim suddenly breaks down, feeling that he has been very presuming and audacious to make such a promise; but as Mr. Allen shows no displeasure, Jim's courage returns, and he falters on, "You'd better know it all, sir. He talked of going—running away; and as he wouldn't come here by himself, I *brought* him."

"Come in, boys." And Mr. Allen, keeping his hand on Walton's shoulder, draws him into the room and shuts the door. "Now, my boy, can you tell me what this great trouble is?"

But Walton, who has always had a foolish fear of the master, is quite unable to speak. He can only look at Jim and whisper "Tell" in a tone of utter despair.

"I would rather that you told me, Walton," says Mr. Allen, sitting down in his chair and folding his hands patiently. "I cannot think you are really such a coward as all that."

Thus appealed to, Walton hands the letter he has received to the master, that it may tell its own tale, and hides his face that he may not see the angry look he is sure will come into Mr. Allen's eyes when he has read the contents. It is a pity he cannot see the sorrowful one that he turns on the miserable boy.

"Who was this messenger?" he asks after a moment.

"Job Wright," murmurs Walton, feeling that he is a criminal about to be questioned under torture, and hardly able to stand from the trembling in his knees. Mr. Allen sees this, and, telling Jim to bring a chair, Walton is allowed to sit, as he replies to the questions Mr. Allen puts to him.

"You ran up this bill without reckoning how much you owed?" is the next inquiry.

"No, sir; I didn't run up a bill," answers Walton, able to speak out the one excuse he has to make. "I paid Job Wright ready money every time, and never had a bill at all."

"I understand. Jim, I think you had better leave us now."

Jim has no desire to remain, but, as Walton clutches him,

whispering, "Don't go—you *said* you wouldn't go!" he looks helplessly at Mr. Allen, not knowing what to do.

"You had better let Jim return to the schoolroom," says Mr. Allen gently. "I think you can hardly expect me to keep him from his lessons any longer, and I prefer to speak to you alone. Come, Walton, the least you can do now is to attend to my wishes."

With a despairing glance, Walton releases Jim, and Mr. Allen goes with him to the door. There Jim has his own confession to make.

"If you please, sir, I know it was very impertinent of me to say it, but I did, and I hope you won't mind. I told Walton I was sure, *quite* sure, you wouldn't cane him if I brought him here. You see, I was afraid he might do something dreadful, he was so wild; and I *knew* you would be kind to him if he told you about it."

"You did quite right, Jim, and, under the circumstances, I shall look upon Walton's confession as voluntary, and not cane him, as I might have done if I had found this out from Hicks. Walton will have you to thank if his punishment is lighter than his fault deserves."

Jim goes away more cheerfully than he came, and Mr. Allen returns to find the cause of all this trouble curled up on the floor, a writhing mass of sobs and protestations.

"Oh, I must go home! I know you'll cane me! I know you'll disgrace me before all the boys! and then I *can't* bear it! They tease me now till it's dreadful; they call me 'Pig,' and ask me about that horrid pie that some one stole. They are always *at* me about things; and if they know this——"

"Sit up, and behave yourself properly," says Mr. Allen,

in a tone that the half-hysterical boy obeys immediately. "Do you think, Walton, that your conduct is not enough to provoke ridicule in your companions? I am not surprised to hear that they laugh at you when you give them so much cause. What makes them select you more than Jim Harrington or Charlie Sexton? Simply because you have shown so decidedly that you are greedy, and by this means furnished them with a handle against you."

Walton sits up and makes an effort to compose himself, and Mr. Allen continues more kindly—

"I do not wish to be hard on you, because I know you have been rather spoilt at home; but I tell you seriously, that it is owing to Jim's having brought you—for it seems that you would not have come to me on your own account—that you have escaped a caning and a more severe punishment. I shall, however, take this as a voluntary confession on your part, and punish you accordingly. Go up and fetch me your purse and all the money you have at this moment. Be as quick as you can."

Walton is not long, and counts out every penny he has in the world.

"For the rest of the term you will have no allowance, and I shall keep this till the holidays. I shall also ask your mother not to send you money, and shall trust to you not to ask her to do so, nor to borrow from other boys. I shall also expect you to bring me any present of money or tip you may receive from any relation during the remainder of the term. By depriving you of money for a time you may perhaps learn its value, and that it is wrong to waste it in the way you have done."

"Is it waste to buy food?" murmurs Walton reluctantly.

"Certainly, when you are not in want of it. Have you been hungry? Were you *requiring* the cakes and sweets upon which you have squandered nearly two pounds? If you were, I must speak to Mrs. Allen and Mrs. Swift, and tell them that the boys are not properly fed. Were you hungry, my boy?"

There is a momentary struggle in Walton's mind, but the kind face of the master wins the day, and the boy hangs his head, answering, "No, sir."

"I am glad of that, even though it might have furnished you with some excuse. It has always been my endeavour to keep my boys well fed, well clothed, well supplied with air and exercise, and, in this manner, to send them to a public school with healthy bodies as well as cultivated brains, able and ready to take their places in the school-world—a larger and far harder world than our small circle here. If I had failed in my duty to you, and thus led you into temptation, I should have been truly sorry; but I do not think even you can complain."

Walton flushes at the words "even you," but Mr. Allen is not thinking of the boy's personal greediness, but of his luxurious home-life during the holidays, and what a bad preparation it is for school training.

"As for this letter from Hicks," says Mr. Allen, taking possession of that elegant epistle and the long bill that accompanies it, "you need not trouble yourself about the matter. I shall see him, if necessary, and pay him, but I shall trust you to have no more dealings there in the future."

When Jim and Walton next meet the latter is washed and

brushed, and all signs of fear and misery have disappeared from his face. He is perhaps a little quieter, but when Jim comes up behind him and says, "Well, old man, how are you?" Walton leans back and looks up with eyes that never again waver in their friendship and allegiance.

"All right, thanks to you," is the reply; and that is the last word between them on the subject of that morning's work—at least, as far as Jim is concerned in it, for the punishment turns out, in a most unexpected manner, to be more severe than either master or pupil have supposed.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONFIRMATION STRONG.

ALL this time Garth is on the watch for the boy who has stolen the pie. He invites Walton to walk with him one day, and pumps him very successfully as to what he has seen. Walton, out in the open air, with the spring sunlight shining down on them, is not unwilling to impart his experience; but even there a creepy feeling comes over him, and, as they stand together in the playground, he gives a half-shuddering glance at the attic window. The next moment he utters a cry, and clutches Garth by the arm.

"I saw it—I saw it then!" exclaims Walton. "It was at the window—looking out!"

"Hold your tongue!" says Garth, roughly shaking him off, for several of the younger boys are about. "Don't be such a coward, but tell me what you saw, and speak low, because of the kids."

"I saw a face—a white face—peering out of the attic window."

"Nonsense!" says Garth, looking up; but there is nothing to be seen now. "You've been talking until you fancy things. There, go in and send Jim to me."

"Oh, I don't like going in. I *know* it isn't all right; there's something——"

But Garth gives him a little push, and saying, "Make

haste, and don't frighten the kids, or Mr. Allen will be down on you," sends off poor Walton, who is in far too great a panic to keep his terrors to himself.

Jim having been sent for by the Captain, Walton is obliged to confide his secret to a select audience, composed of Crofts, Sexton, Macklin, Wilson, and Savile, to whom he imparts all he has seen, and implores their advice and support.

There is perplexed silence when he has told his tale. No one tells the trembling boy they do not believe him, and that his reputation for courage is so small that he might easily fancy he had seen something when there was really nothing to be afraid of. But Wilson suddenly has a bright idea.

"Cheer up, Walton, we'll settle the ghost," he says, laughing, "so don't be doleful; only get Garth to give you back the gas ball, and you'll see how I'll manage."

Then, in whispers, Wilson unfolds his plan, and the boys are amused and not displeased with the idea, but the first thing is to get back the confiscated balloon. Crofts undertakes to ask for it, and he goes out to Garth and Jim, who are in the playground. Garth is willing to give up the ball, and ask no questions as to its future use, and he and Jim remain in the same spot in the playground, while Crofts goes to find the ball in Garth's bedroom.

A few minutes later he returns with the bandbox, but he is white and breathless.

"I've seen it," he says quickly. "It came out of your room, Garth!"

"*What?*"

"A small, white-faced man. He glided out and slipped round the corner, and when I followed he was gone. I went

up the stairs after him, and thought I heard a little noise, but couldn't see anything. He'd just vanished."

Even Garth and Jim lose some colour for a moment, when Garth recovers himself, and says decidedly, "This is getting unpleasant, and something must be done."

"Wilson has an idea," says Crofts hesitatingly; "not a bad one altogether; only, if I tell you, you'll have to report it."

"Don't tell me then," says Garth. "Sep won't listen to a word, and has begged Robinson to do the same. Mrs. Swift daren't say anything, and Littlejohn's no good. But there *is* something wrong, that I'm certain of, and though I don't believe in ghosts, like Walton, I'm pretty sure that some one is playing tricks. It can't be one of us boys; I've thought of that, but couldn't see how it was possible. It might be Buttons—he's got cheek for anything."

"But how could he get away? I was at the top of the stairs and followed, and he disappeared."

"Did you hunt in all the rooms?"

"I opened every door, and looked under every bed. There is only the maid's room up there and the infirmary."

"Where's the attic door?" asks Jim.

"It hasn't a door at all on the ground, only a trap-door over the infirmary. No one could get up without a ladder."

The boys shake their heads and again murmur that the whole affair is very extraordinary, and then Crofts carries off the ball, and Jim and Garth are left to talk over this last surprise and watch the attic window. They have not long to wait.

"Look!" whispers Jim, and then both boys see a white face looking out furtively, as if afraid of being seen, and then draw back once more into the shadow within.

"That is no ghost," says Garth. "It is a man in hiding. Poor creature! What an awful life to lead. What shall I do now, Jim?"

But Jim ventures to offer no advice on so delicate a point, and Garth decides to find Mr. Robinson and explain the matter to him. Unfortunately this cannot be done, as Mr. Robinson has gone out for the rest of the day, so they decide upon waiting until to-morrow, unless Garth and some of the boys can manage in the meantime to catch and overpower the supposed ghost. That would not be difficult to do from the look of him, Garth thinks, for that white face cannot belong to a strong man, and Jim, who has seen him nearer, can bear witness that he is small and slight.

This night, then, they will watch, and do what they can themselves to find out this unknown inhabitant of the house, and if they do not succeed, they will go to Mr. Allen to-morrow, and ask him to have the attic searched, which is only a reasonable request under the circumstances, and one he can hardly refuse.

In the meantime Wilson prepares for his attack, which is, however, kept a secret from Garth and Jim, though Jim is employed, unknown to himself, in a very important part.

"Look here, Jim," Sexton calls to him, "we want you to paint a skull on this ball. Will you?"

"Haven't got paint enough," says Jim. "Besides, if you're going to frighten the maids, I won't do it."

"It isn't for the maids, or for any one in the house. Look here, just do as we ask you, and don't ask questions."

"You aren't going to frighten Sarah or Bess—honour bright?"

"Honour bright!"

"Nor Buttons, nor Walton, nor the masters?"

"Certainly not. Paint away, Raphael, and don't talk."

Some whitish paint is brought, and Jim looks at it.

"It's rather queer stuff. Whose is it?"

"Wilson's."

"Well, what am I to do?"

Under direction, Jim paints the ball with the white stuff, making two skull faces, one on each side of the ball, and covering the rest as much as possible with the paint.

"I wish you'd tell me what this is for?" says Jim, as he puts the final touches. "It's horrible enough to make old Sep himself believe in the supernatural. Where did this paint come from, Wilson?"

"Job Wright got it for me."

"Did you pay him?" asks Jim.

"Yes, but he didn't cheat *me*, for an excellent reason. They wouldn't give him any credit at the shop, so he had to be honest, or he wouldn't have made any pence for himself out of it."

"I'm very glad he has gone," says Jim gravely.

"So am I!" says Walton. "I say, Jim, that *does* look awful!"

Jim holds up the ball admiringly, and again looks at the paint.

"What do you call this stuff?"

"That's splendid! Let us have the ball. I will put it to dry. Thanks;—and the paint and brush."

"What do you call that stuff?" asks Jim again.

But Wilson has gone away with the things, and the other boys do not answer.

"Look here, you haven't got me into a scrape without letting me know?" he asks, flushing hotly. "Sexton, you can tell me; what have I been painting that with?"

But Charlie Sexton only laughs, and Crofts slaps Jim on the back, telling him to cheer up, because it's done now, and can't be helped.

At this moment Walton, who has gone to fetch a book, comes back, and Jim appeals to him—does he know about it?

"Yes," says Walton; "don't you? That's too bad, for they ought to have told you if you were helping. It's *luminous* paint."

"Oh, I say, stop! I won't have anything to do with it," exclaims Jim, aghast.

"Too late, my boy," says Wilson, returning. "It's all locked up safe, and we're awfully obliged to you all the same."

Jim can only feel that his vanity is to blame, as he would never have done it if Sexton had not said he was the only boy in the school who could do it well enough.

CHAPTER XVII.

TWO BIRDS WITH ONE STONE.

THERE is a suppressed excitement about some of the boys that evening. Mr. Robinson is out, Mr. Allen not well, and Mr. Littlejohn therefore reads prayers and sees that the lights are out. Could Mr. Littlejohn see under the bed-clothes, he would find that nightshirts have been put on over waistcoats and trousers, and that at least a dozen boys are ready for something—either mischief or serious business.

Garth, who has a room to himself, and indulges in a dressing-gown and slippers, dons these garments, and waits for further developments of the plot.

A little before ten o'clock Mr. Robinson returns, and as Mr. Allen has not been well, Mr. Robinson is tired, and Mrs. Swift sleepy, the lights are put out, and all retire to their rooms rather earlier than usual. In the long pause that follows many boys go to sleep—all, indeed, who are not immediately concerned in watching.

Jim, as previously arranged, goes up to Garth. They are to watch the upper stairs and prevent any one from coming down unperceived from the attic.

What is going on on the lower floor is unknown to the Captain and Jim, who wait at their posts, rather young and restless sentinels.

"Have you some strong cord in your pocket, Jim?—you

may find it useful," says Garth in a whisper; "I have some here and can give you half."

It is divided in the darkness with a knife, and then Jim slips off his nightshirt and puts on a black jacket which makes it impossible for him to be seen in the shadow, and Garth does the same. They have not much longer to wait, for a faint light is seen above, and creeping down the stairs comes the man Jim has encountered before. He pauses cautiously from time to time and looks round, but though the door is ajar, he cannot see the boys, who watch him through the crack of the hinge.

He passes on, and Garth whispers, "Follow him, Jim; "you're light and he won't hear you. I will draw up the lift when he is gone, and then join you. Don't let him see you—better be heard than seen. Make haste."

Jim is as light and silent as a boy can be, and he soon overtakes the man, who is cautiously making his way to the lift door. This he opens and shuts behind him, and Jim flies down two flights as fast as he dares and hides on the same floor as his own dormitory. Presently the lift door opens and the man comes out, looking all round before he ventures into the passage. He then goes into the room where Mrs. Swift has had supper and clears off everything that remains into a large red handkerchief, evidently brought for the purpose. A sound at the further end of the passage makes him start, and Jim sees him pocket the handkerchief hastily, then stoop and pick up the poker. Armed with this in one hand and his light in the other, he returns to the passage, where he sees, coming towards him from the other part of the house, Mr. Allen in his dressing-gown and holding a candle before

him. In a moment the strange man blows out his lamp and waits concealed in the doorway, the poker in his hand and a desperate look in his white face. Jim stands a little behind him, wondering what Garth is doing and how he can warn Mr. Allen of his danger.

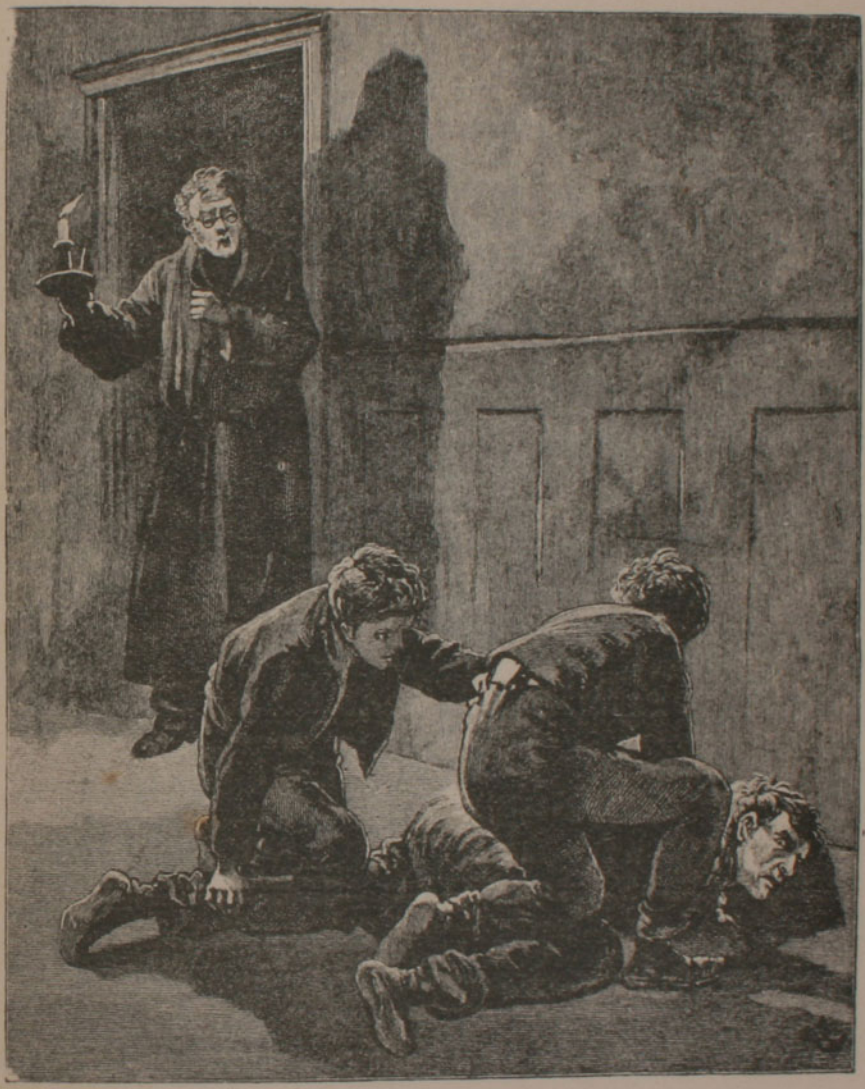
"Who is that?" says Mr. Allen in a low voice, anxious not to disturb the house. "Come here, my boy."

But the figure does not move, and keeps his face in the shadow, while Jim sees the poker grasped more firmly and the arm preparing for the blow that will be given as soon as the master comes near enough. Jim is trembling with nervous excitement, but he does not lose his presence of mind. He has been hoping for Garth, but as the Captain does not come everything must depend upon him. Jim holds the cord ready in his hand, and as Mr. Allen comes forward and the man begins to lift his arm, throws it suddenly over the thief's head, and jerks him back so quickly that the poker falls with a crash, and, losing his balance, he comes down full length on the oilcloth.

Immediately after, Garth springs out of the darkness and is on him, and together the boys tie his hands and legs, so that he is helpless and can neither escape nor do further harm.

Mr. Allen, considerably startled and unnerved by illness, is unable to realise the situation, and as the boys finish tying up their prisoner, he asks angrily, "Garth, what is this? Jim, who is this man, and what are you doing here at this hour?"

"We have caught the ghost at last, sir," answers Garth, rather breathlessly; "this is the man who has stolen so many things from the larder and frightened the maids. He also



TOGETHER THE BOYS TIE HIS HANDS.

gave Jim a black eye one night, and he was just going to hit you with this poker, only Jim managed to stop him."

Mr. Allen looks at the boys, and then at the man who lies crouching and bound at his feet. For a moment he is unable to speak, and picks up the poker before he opens his lips.

"My dear boys, I don't understand all this, but I am very grateful to you both for saving me from such a blow. I am far from well, and it might have been serious. Where this fellow has been hidden I cannot imagine, or what we had better do with him now that he is caught."

"Here's the linen cupboard, sir; we can put him in there till the morning."

By this time the house is roused; Mr. Robinson appears in hastily donned attire, and Mrs. Swift opens her door to ask anxiously what is the matter. Mr. Littlejohn is busy with the boys in his dormitory, where he finds that Jim, Walton, Crofts, and Sexton are missing, and has much trouble in preventing the rest from rushing pell-mell into the passage. Mr. Robinson begs Mr. Allen to return to his own room and leave him in charge, as by this time the head master is looking ghastly from mingled excitement and illness, but until the man is locked up he refuses to go.

The helpless man is therefore pulled and pushed into the cupboard, the door is shut and locked, and all the "fun" seems over, when as the key turns in the lock a wild shriek is heard below, followed immediately by a clamour of voices

"Here he is! Here's the ghost!"

"He's got tools with him. Tie him up."

Then Wilson's voice above the others—

"Why, he's the man that sold me that *thing* and called it a watch!"

An astonished silence follows this speech.

"Another ghost?" exclaims Mr. Allen, and, followed by Mr. Robinson, Garth, and Jim, he hurries down, carrying his lighted candle.

Downstairs is a scene of wild confusion. The house has been entered by the kitchen window, but the most alarming sight, and one from which Mr. Allen himself recoils with a violent start, is not the burglar, now trussed with his own crowbar, but in the kitchen passage, hanging apparently in mid-air, floats a large, luminous skull, an awful-looking thing, that being the first "curiosity" the travelling gentleman had discovered. Startled out of all self-control, the thief had given a cry on seeing it, and this sound had been the signal for the boys to throw themselves upon him.

This last tumult has put an end to all Mr. Littlejohn's powers of keeping order, and the sound also reaches the upper dormitories. Boys in their night attire come pouring down the stairs with startled faces and anxious questions. One or two also start and call out on seeing the painted skull, so that for a short time there is a scene of wild confusion.

The two prisoners are shut up in separate cupboards, and then Mr. Allen is persuaded to go back and leave everything in Mr. Robinson's care.

While all is in an uproar, Wilson gets hold of the luminous ball, and going out into the garden by the open kitchen window, cuts the string and sends it adrift. There is a light wind and it mounts up merrily, sailing through the air at a fine pace, and is soon lost to view; while Wilson returns the

way he came and mingles unperceived with the crowd, all being too busy to notice that he has been absent. Mr. Robinson at last succeeds in sending the boys back to their beds and some sort of order is restored, but it is a long time before the disturbed hive is really quiet and settled down after such astonishing incidents, till at last silence reigns once more, and a quiet night follows for the boys.

How the two men feel in their different cupboards, no one troubles to inquire, but certainly one is better off than the other, for as soon as all is still, the white-faced ghost-man wriggles out of his cords, and drawing from his pocket a handkerchief well filled with scraps of food, proceeds to satisfy his hunger.

The other unfortunate man has nothing wherewith to pass the weary time except the remembrance that he has been recognised by Wilson.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"*THE YOUNG HERO.*"

"I SAY, Harrington, haven't you a little brother at The Birches?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, just you look at this." And Geoff's schoolfellow hands him an evening paper, in which he reads the following:—

"*Daring attempted Burglary at a School—Extraordinary Courage of a Schoolboy.*—Last night a daring robbery was attempted at The Birches, the well-known school of Mr. Septimus Allen, near Rushton. This gentleman, roused by unusual sounds, was on his way to the schoolroom, when he was attacked by a burglar armed with a poker. As Mr. Allen was unarmed, he might have been severely injured but for the bravery of one of his scholars. This young gentleman, Mr. James Harrington by name, sprang on the ruffian from behind, and Mr. Thomas Garth (son of the Honourable T. Garth, M.P. for Dashtown) coming also to the rescue, they were able to overpower him. The burglar, who was a man of enormous stature and ferocious aspect, offered to make some statements, but, as some other young gentlemen had caught another of the gang in the schoolroom below, he was not listened to, and the men were secured in separate rooms until the arrival of the police. The rest of the gang have escaped, but the police are on their track. On inquiry, we learnt that Mr. Allen is seriously indisposed after the shock. The young hero, Mr. James Harrington, with a modesty as becoming as it is rare, declined to answer any of our correspondent's questions, but the facts were easily ascertained from others. The men will be brought before the magistrate to-morrow, though it is feared Mr. Allen will be unable to appear in court,

as his condition is far from satisfactory. Mr. Jasper Harrington and Mr. Ward are in attendance.—From the *Rushton Daily Packet and Courier.*"

Geoff devours this paragraph with eager eyes, and longs for more, and the next post brings him a letter from Jim, in which we have taken the liberty of correcting the orthography and punctuation, in order to make it more comprehensible to the reader. The letter is as follows :—

"MY DEAR GEOFF,—I hope you won't have seen the awful rot in the paper about what happened here. They've got it all wrong, and I meant to be the first to tell you. I've said before how puzzled we were about a ghost. Well, the ghost was just a man who had got in, and was living in the attic loft over the infirmary, so no one heard him moving. After he was caught, a rope ladder was found hanging from the loft door, and when he went up he pulled this up after him. He was very clever about some things, and kept the lift in splendid working order, so it made no noise. That paper said he was big and ferocious, but he is quite a little chap, very light and thin, with a poor white face, and I hope he won't be punished badly, though he did think of knocking down Sep with the poker. He looked half-starved, and seemed so desperate and miserable. He meant to live in the loft as long as he could, he said, for he had been there some weeks already, and he had got such a funny collection of things up there. Two of Garth's blankets taken off his bed, and rugs, and clothes, and money—lots of things, all in a heap together. I think he is a little mad, but the policeman didn't think so. The other man, caught by Crofts, Sexton, and some other boys, was just a thief come in thinking that there was something very valuable in the Australian curiosities—big nuggets of gold, and such things. Wilson says it is Garth's fault for saying there were 'heaps' when he asked, but I say it was his fault for telling things to a stranger and such a cad as he looked. But that isn't the worst of it, for Mr. Allen hasn't been well lately, and that fright was too much for him, and so he's ill—*very* ill, Uncle Jasper says. We are all awfully sorry—even Wilson, I think, is too—and did our lessons as well as we could, though Mr. Robinson had to take double classes. One funny thing was, that the boys had an air-

ball filled with gas, and I painted two skulls on it back to back, like the head of Janus, you know. Well, it was luminous paint, only I didn't know; and when the thief-man had got in, Sexton tied it on the door where he was going to get out, and when he tried to get away he could only scream, and so they caught him. That was how hey did it, only they thought they were going to catch the ghost, and not the burglar. Mr. Robinson is awfully kind. When those paper men wanted to talk to me, he said I needn't go unless I liked, and then he went and spoke to them for me, and said I didn't want to appear in their stupid papers.* I'll let you know how Mr. Allen goes on. I do hope he will get better soon.—Your loving brother, JIM.

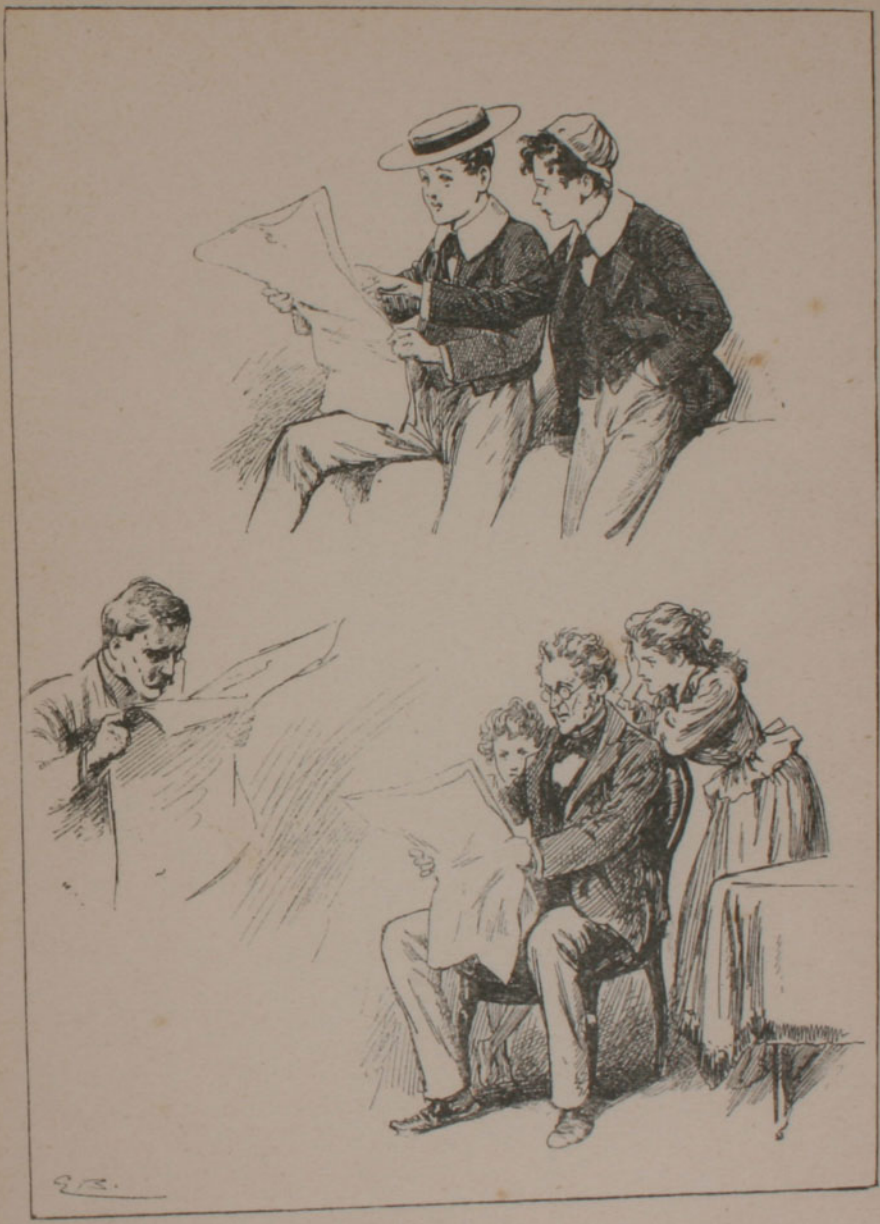
"*P.S.*—The ghost-man is an escaped convict or something. I am sorry for him having to go back to prison, and feel as if I had sent him there. The other man has also been 'wanted' for some time about other robberies, so we seem to have done some service to the public. I say, what a letter I have written!

"*P.S.* No. 2.—The ghost-man had on some of Garth's clothes. He is such a little man for his age, which is twenty-five.

"*P.S.* No. 3. Later.—Uncle Jasper says perhaps you will want the last news. He says Mr. Allen is very bad, but he is hopeful. We all keep very quiet, and it is so horrid, and unlike school or anything else."

Such a wonderful epistle from Jim is, of course, read by Geoff with the greatest interest, though, but for the newspaper report, he would have known very little about the facts from the letter. Later some of the "fellows" inquire of Geoff about his brother; even his class-master makes some remarks about it, so that Jim's name is much mentioned at this time. At Berry Green Cottage, Uncle James reads the account with mingled pride and thankfulness, and Aunt

* In spite of Jim's assertion, Mr. Robinson did *not* say this, or anything like it.



"Just look at this!" "The major is interested too." "Uncle James reads the account.

Bethia says she will always feel Jim's presence a comfort in the house, as she has a great terror of burglars.

Maidie laughs and cries as she reads the paragraph, and Lotty's cheeks turn red as she says reflectively, "I like having a brother like that. It's *so* nice to be proud of one's brother!"

Soon after breakfast Major Harrington orders the dog-cart, and offers to drive Mr. James over to The Birches, to see Jim and make inquiries after Mr. Allen. This being just what the dear old gentleman has been most ardently wishing, he is not long in getting ready, and their arrival is a delightful surprise to Jim.

It is with some anxiety that Major Harrington waits for the boy. Will he be conceited or self-conscious from so much notice and praise? The father's fears are over the moment he sees his son, for Jim casts himself into his arms, saying—

"Oh, father! how *good* of you to come! and Uncle James too! And poor Mr. Allen is so awfully ill, father, and Uncle Jasper says he is really bad. Isn't it dreadful for Mrs. Allen—and Fabius, father; I can't get Fabius out of my head!"

"I am truly sorry to hear such a bad account," says Major Harrington gravely.

"Uncle Jasper says he hasn't been well for some time."

"I dare say; but now tell us about the burglars," says Uncle James, to whom Mr. Allen is of very secondary interest compared with Jim.

"Oh, they're at the police-station, and some of us have to go up and give evidence to-morrow. Mr. Robinson is going with us; but it is very horrid, and now I'm so sorry for the

men. That traveller fellow is a bad lot, though. He sold Wilson what he called a gold hunter watch, and put it into a washleather case, and when he looked at it it was just nothing—not a watch at all, only a tin case like a toy, with stones and things inside. I'm not sure that I mind about his being punished; it's my poor ghost that I'm sorry for."

CHAPTER XIX.

A TRYING TIME.

FOR some days Mr. Allen is very dangerously ill, and during that time Garth, Jim, Wilson, and Moss have to go before the magistrate and give their evidence as to what they know of the two men. At first the prisoners are supposed to have been in league, but evidence shows plainly that for some weeks the ghost-man has occupied the attic loft where, by the help of an ingeniously contrived rope ladder, he had gone up and down at will. The school hours, meals, &c., being regular, he had learnt exactly the times when he would probably be safe from discovery, and had made the best use of his knowledge. In this manner he obtained food and shelter, was hidden from the police, and managed to find some amusement in his position by watching the boys' games and frightening the maids.

He is sent back to prison to finish the remainder of his term, and takes Jim's sincere pity with him, in spite of the bruised eye, which has still a slight discolouration round it.

With the other man there is more to be done. The watch that Wilson had coveted was part of the spoils of a former burglary, and, as the owner appears to claim it, Wilson is very glad that it is not in his possession, and hopes that the story of the watch will never be known. However, the young barrister who has been engaged to defend Henry

Westcroft hears of it, and Wilson has rather a bad time when answering the questions in the County Court.

This examination is a lesson to him, which perhaps he needed, showing that it is not safe to have money dealings with strangers who introduce themselves; and that, if you are offered valuable goods at an impossibly cheap rate, either they have not been honestly come by, or you are going to be defrauded in some manner unknown to you.

At any other time Wilson's conduct would have called forth a reprimand from the masters, but now it passes without further notice than the magistrate's remark that he "hopes it will be a lesson to him for the future."

The master who should speak the words of counsel and wisdom lies between life and death in his own room at The Birches; Mr. Robinson, however, is equal to the occasion, and the lessons are continued as steadily as usual. Mr. Robinson takes all Mr. Allen's classes, and a clever young college friend comes down for the time and takes any class that requires a master. The German master also remains for a longer time, and is with the boys much more than usual. He has not been many months in England, but his knowledge of the language is fairly good, though he often makes comical blunders, and for this reason the boys tease him, and delight in watching for these mistakes.

One afternoon some of the boys gather round him to hear some of his stories of the Franco-German war, which he is never tired of telling, and Wilson dares to make some comparison between the English and the German army, to the disparagement of the latter, though, of course, he really knows nothing of either.

"Ach! you English pipples," retorts the German, "you are zo ztrange. One make at you a face, and you gry out; you vight and knock him down, and zen you grow over him and zhout. Zen—zee!—he get up and knock you down. Zen you all surprise, and use all your strength, and zo knock him down again, and dread on him zo he can vight no more. You talk and zhout zo much ven you are at your war, and tell your enemy vat you do with your vree press. Vree press is good, but you make too vree. I know. I was before Metz, and zere I got my wound—I can show him—in my chest. Ze doctor look at me and say, 'Poor fellow! he all over;' but ze zister take gare of me, and he not all over yet. Ha! ha!"

The boys join in this laugh, as much at as with the speaker; and then Wilson begins about Waterloo.

"Ach! your Vaterloo!" interrupts the German; "you are zo vont of your Vaterloo, he last you a long time for ein grosse victory. But even zen, had it not been for our Blücher——"

But at this point Herr Winkler finds his voice drowned by an indignant chorus of boyish voices. "Don't howl, you fellows," says Garth; "let him say what he likes. It only proves the importance of the Battle of Waterloo, that the Prussians have always been so anxious to claim a share in the victory."

"Besides," says Mr. Robinson, who has just come into the room in time to hear the last few remarks, "there is such a thing as courtesy and kindness to a foreigner who has come to your country, and should be treated with some of the consideration that we use towards a guest."

"But Waterloo, sir—*Waterloo*—he says that but for Blücher——"

"Ah! that old story. I am afraid, Herr Winkler, that you will not find many Englishmen willing to accept your view."

"Ach! vell, zen I will not dry. But in oder respects we are ze grader nation. Look at your work pipples—your lower glasses—look at zem and zen at us. You drink and——"

"Why, I thought the Germans were always drinking beer!" exclaimed Jim in surprise.

"Not zo; ve take zome beer at zome times. You have no vin ordinaire, nozzing but your beer, vich is bad. Of myzelf, I prever claret, but of beer I zometimes take a pinch."

Mr. Robinson retires rapidly that he may not be seen laughing, but the boys laugh loud and long, while the good-natured German, unconscious of his mistake, is pleased that he can contribute to their amusement.

But for all this it is a sad time at The Birches, though Mr. Jasper Harrington still speaks hopefully; but Mr. Ward takes a far more gloomy view of Mr. Allen's case, and poor Mrs. Allen is in a state of constant anxiety.

A trained nurse from London has come to help, and the boys are shut out of the playground near Mr. Allen's end of the house; but to their credit be it said that they show every consideration in their power by making as little noise as possible when near, and keeping as far as they can from the house when at play.

Mrs. Swift is now always busy, and is obliged to leave much of the housekeeping to Elizabeth and her assistants; the result is that a sudden spirit of economy is discovered in the quantity and quality of the food, which has never been known before. This is chiefly noticeable at supper, as at that meal none of the masters are present. Even the less

fastidious boys grumble a little, and the result is that they decide upon striking. The strike is to be in the mild form of eating all they can get and asking for more as many times as can be managed; and one night this proves very successful, the larder is all but emptied, and Elizabeth groans over the shocking quantity boys can eat.

Next day, of course, Mrs. Swift hears of it, and is much astonished, but has no time to investigate the matter thoroughly, though she does speak of it to Mr. Robinson, who soon understands what it means. He makes a suggestion to Mrs. Swift, which she at once approves, and when, two nights later, the boys begin the same game, several large suet puddings are brought up, and, do their utmost, the boys cannot manage to eat them all, particularly as William announces, as he puts them on the table, that the young gentlemen can eat as much as they like to-night, as there are plenty more puddings downstairs.

Fortunately for the boys, Mrs. Swift makes Elizabeth alter her economical management, and after their defeat she treats them better, so that they have no more reason for grumbling.

In the meantime, Mr. Allen slowly struggles back to life and consciousness, to the almost overpowering joy of Mrs. Allen, the intense relief of the masters, and the unfeigned satisfaction of every boy worthy of his salt; and, in spite of many faults and failings, there are none wholly unworthy of that common but valuable article of diet.

CHAPTER XX.

A SUBSCRIPTION.

WHEN once Mr. Allen is out of danger, he begins to get well much faster than any one has dared to hope. Even Mr. Jasper Harrington is surprised to find how rapidly his patient gains strength after such a serious illness.

Mr. Robinson continues at the head of the school with his assistant masters, Mr. Roberts and Mr. Littlejohn, and all goes quietly with the boys.

Mr. and Mrs. Allen spend three weeks at the sea, and the boys make up their minds to have a grand rejoicing when they come back, for which purpose Garth, and some of the elder boys, hold a consultation in the small schoolroom, with Jim outside to guard the door. A strange, unbusiness-like meeting it is, in spite of Garth's attempts to keep up a parliamentary style, for the boys will discuss other matters in defiance of the chairman.

"I have called this meeting, gentlemen," begins Garth, "to speak on a subject which I believe to be of interest to all of us."

"It isn't cricket term," says Crofts unbelievingly.

"I think," continues Garth a little pompously, "that I am not wrong in saying that the recovery of our——" here he suddenly finds himself hesitating between the adjective "good" and "excellent," but with a rush he rejects them

both; "our master is a subject which interests us deeply, and therefore I have asked you to meet me here to-day to discuss the advisability of celebrating his recovery and return to The Birches in some appropriate manner. Sexton, I wish you wouldn't talk when I'm making a speech."

"Oh, beg pardon," says Sexton hastily, and continues the discussion with Clark as before.

"What shall we do?" asks Crofts.

"Couldn't some of you make suggestions?" says Garth modestly.

"Shall we canvass the whole school," suggests Moss, who is socialistic, and does not approve of distinctions, "if they are to subscribe?"

"I don't think that is necessary," answers Garth; "it would waste a good deal of time, and half of them wouldn't know what to say, or would just follow each other with some stupid idea, and swamp our votes. No; there are enough of us to represent the others, and we can settle—really. Sexton, I do *wish* you and Clark would be quiet, and attend to what is said."

"I've heard every word," says Sexton, looking injured. "I'll vote for anything you please."

"Have you no suggestion of your own?"

"Not one. Fire away, Garth, and tell us what to do, and let us go, for we're wasting all our time in here."

Moss, however, has his views, and insists upon airing them. In spite of remonstrances, he rises to express his indignation that age and standing in the school should be considered a sufficient reason for voting away the money of others without consulting them.

During this speech Clark begins to write on a scrap of paper, Sexton starts a discussion with Crofts on the cricket prospects for next term, and Garth tries in vain to silence Moss, and recall the attention of the members of his committee.

"There isn't *one* of you really attending to the business," he says at last, in indignant tones. "Moss can only talk about disposing of money that we haven't yet collected, and the rest——"

"Don't include *me*," says Clark. "Look here, haven't I listened?—

'Garth called a mighty council
After poor Sep was ill,
And with a present they resolved
To gild the bitter pill.
A fine and costly present—
But Moss was heard to say
It was a shame to fleece the kids
Who dared not disobey.'"

Garth laughs, Moss stares, and thinks he has heard something rather like it before, and Sexton suddenly wakes up, and makes the first practical suggestion.

"I say, let's collect the money first, and when we see what we've got, we shall know better what to do with it."

Garth assents, feeling a little surprised that he had not thought of this himself, and he undertakes to collect from the boys.

There is a discussion as to whether they should all give one fixed sum, but the end of the argument is that half-a-crown is to be the lowest sum subscribed, and five shillings the highest.

Garth can presently be seen walking about, armed with a list of names and a pencil, and Sexton and Crofts undertake to bring up the subscribers.

Few of the boys give less than the five shillings, but Wilson, who has had losses, cannot rise to more than the half-crown, and when Walton is brought up, he makes the astounding announcement that he cannot subscribe at all. At first the boys laugh, and think he is joking, but at last Garth grows weary of the farce, and demands a serious reply.

"It *is* a serious reply," says poor Walton, changing colour rapidly, and twisting his fingers in nervous misery; "I'm very sorry—I wish I could subscribe, but I can't!"

"*Why* can't you?" asks Garth.

"I—I haven't any money," stammers Walton.

"Then write home for some. You've boasted often enough that your mother will send you all the money you ask for. Come, sit down and write."

"It is no good," says Walton miserably; "I—I can't write, and she wouldn't send it. I can't subscribe—I wish I could!"

"I'll lend you some," says Jim quickly. He cannot bear to see his friend in such distress, though he is rather indignant with him for refusing to subscribe.

"I can't!" repeats Walton hopelessly; "it is no good, you must leave me out."

"But *Alfred!*" Jim can say no more, so great is his astonishment.

"Yes—I know," says Walton, with a faint smile; "I can't help it—I wish I could—but it's no good."

This is the only explanation he vouchsafes to all inquiries, only altering the form, but never the sense, and even when, later in the day, Jim comes to him and begs to be told why he will not subscribe to the present, Walton's only reply is that it can't be helped anyhow, and there is nothing to be done.

Walton having a rather odd, sulky temper, Jim, ignoring the reiterated "I'm very sorry," rashly concludes that Walton is angry with the master for some punishment inflicted on account of the Hicks business, and he is, therefore, virtuously indignant with his friend.

"I never asked you before, but now you might as well tell me—is it because of that—that bill?" demands Jim.

Walton nods.

"But I thought you were grateful to Mr. Allen, and would have been so glad to subscribe."

"So I should—if I could," sighs Walton; "but I can't help it, and it's no good."

"Let him alone, Jim," says Garth; "if he chooses to sulk, and be out of the fun, it isn't our fault; and if he isn't willing to give, we don't want him to give at all. There's plenty to buy a nice present, even without his five shillings!"

This is true. The boys have all given liberally, in spite of the term being nearly at an end, and money consequently rather scarce. But home letters come with postal orders, and in the end Garth finds the sum far surpassing his expectations. Then Mr. Robinson is consulted as to what the present had better be. Some of the boys object to this, thinking that it would be nicer to manage it all themselves, but Garth wisely considers that Mr. Robinson will be more

likely to know Mr. Allen's tastes, and insists on consulting him.

A clock for the dining-room mantlepiece, with an inscription in bronze, is suggested, and hailed with entire satisfaction by all the subscribers; even Moss has no objection to raise. Garth, however, cannot resist the temptation of saying that the inscription will have to be carefully worded, and the names all given, as it is not from the *whole* school, one boy having refused to subscribe.

"I haven't refused!" says Walton, unable to let this remark pass without notice.

"Well, you haven't *done* it, which amounts to the same thing," replies Garth with contempt.

CHAPTER XXI.

A SINGULAR REQUEST.

"My dear Robinson,—Can you possibly explain the meaning of the letter which I enclose? It came this morning, and though, of course, I should not think of granting such a request, if the boy is in real difficulty about money, it should be looked into. If all is well I shall be home on Tuesday next, and I daresay the boys will not object to a holiday on Wednesday to celebrate the (to me) joyful occasion of my return in re-established health to the old school which I thought at one time I should never see again. You may give the boys this message from me."

Mr. Allen's envelope also contains another letter. It is not well written, and one or two blots have been scratched into holes, but it has clearly been sent with an earnest wish that the request should be granted, unusual though it may be.

"To Mr. Allen.

"Dear Sir,—Plese will you let Mr. Robinson cain me as much as you like and let me have five shillins, because I know now about the value of monney and I have lernt that lesson so I hope you will not refuse me for though I do not like a caning I want the five shilins a grate deal more. Plees will you be so kind and I am very glad to here you are getting well.—I am your obedient pupil,

"A. Walton."

Mr. Robinson at once guesses the reason of such a request, but as he has been sworn to secrecy by Garth, he can only write back vague assurances that as far as he can

tell Walton is all right, and not in money difficulties that need give Mr. Allen any uneasiness.

No one knows the heart-sickening dread with which Walton awaits Mr. Allen's reply. Either way the answer must be a shock. Mr. Robinson will probably strike harder than Mr. Allen, and Walton has a terror of pain, but then the present—and to do the boy full credit it is not so much because of his schoolfellows, but because of Mr. Allen himself, that he wishes his name to be among the donors. He has at last begun to appreciate the kindness and sympathy with which each boy is treated individually by Mr. Allen, and that his name should therefore be conspicuously absent from this proof of the affection and regard felt by the boys for their master, is a bitter humiliation and grief.

Alas! when Mr. Allen's reply comes it is very short, and holds out no comfort.

"MY DEAR WALTON,—I come home next Tuesday. As soon as I am able I will hear what you have to say, and trust you have not got into any further difficulty.—I am, your affectionate master,

"SEPTIMUS ALLEN."

With a dreary sigh Walton pockets the letter. It will be too late then, so he must be left out of it all—all the fun, all the thanks. It will not be much of a holiday to him, only a day when others will be more free to torment him.

The clock is very handsome; black marble inlaid with coloured marbles, and the bronze plate with the inscription, "Mr. Septimus Allen, from his affectionate pupils. On his recovery from a severe illness." And then the date.

"Any pupil not subscribing isn't affectionate," says Garth pointedly, and Walton writhes in silence.

Poor boy, there seems no end to his mortifications, and Jim continues to be a little cool and distant.

When the clock comes on the Monday, and is exhibited in the schoolroom, Walton comes to look at it with the other boys, partly from a real wish to see, and also that his absence may not provoke comment, but that is an impossible wish.

Wilson is always ready to point out what is unpleasant, and having spent his half-crown on Mr. Allen instead of (as he had intended) on the repairs of his handsome, double-cased, gold hunter-watch, he feels unusually virtuous and critical.

"There's nothing for *you* to look at, Walton. As Garth says, you aren't affectionate, and needn't poke your nose into *our* clock!"

Walton changes colour and retires promptly, but Jim sees that his lips quiver, and there is a sudden red flush in the eyelids that looks like tears.

This is more than Jim can bear. He goes over to where Walton is standing and says, "Come out and have a game of tennis, Alf. There's no one at the court now."

With a sound almost like a sob Walton seizes Jim's arm, and they go out together. Alone with his friend in the pleasant spring air, the miserable boy makes an effort to recover his composure as he says piteously—

"I can't help it, I've done all I could, Jim. I wrote to Mr. Allen, but I couldn't explain, and he doesn't understand."

"Written to him about what?" asks Jim in surprise.

"About letting me have five shillings. You see," here poor Walton turns red, "you said a little while ago that I'd

been so much better at the games and things, and could run more since—you know—and the other boys don't call me names, or didn't till this—this *dreadful* present was started. But—I didn't tell you before—you see, I have no money. Mr. Allen took it all, and said I wasn't to ask or borrow. I *did* write to him, but he doesn't know about the present, so of course he only thinks I've done something else—got into another scrape. There's his letter."

Jim reads it in silence, and begins to understand.

"Why didn't you tell Garth?" he asks, after a moment.

"He'd have told the others, and they'd want to know all about it, and then—oh, Jim! it's been a worse punishment—just lately, you know—than Mr. Allen could have thought. I'd far rather have had the caning and subscribed. It is hard, too, because I like him quite as much as the other boys do, and I'm *sure* I like him better than Wilson and that lot do!"

Jim is very sorry, but feels there is nothing to be done except to try by his kindness to soften some of the hardships of Walton's position; and in this he is fairly successful, as Walton has felt Jim's coldness more acutely than anything else, though he does not reproach his friend by saying so.

"Look here," says Jim, on the Tuesday, as they walk up and down the playground arm in arm, "couldn't you write a letter to be given with the present? I'll see that it gets to him, and you can say how sorry you are that you couldn't subscribe, but that it wasn't your fault—something like that."

"No," answers Walton drearily; "I don't think I can

write again. Perhaps he'll know and remember, and if he does he'll know by my letter that I really wished to give. I can't do anything more about it, only I'm sorry."

"So am I, because it seems so extra hard on you."

"He said he wished me to learn the value of money. I think I have, Jim; for I'd give a great deal—all the sweets that mother'll give me in the holidays—to have that Hicks money back again, and give it to the clock instead!"

Unfortunately, all this wisdom comes too late for this particular occasion, but Walton is not likely to forget such a very practical lesson on the use and abuse of money.

Early that afternoon Mr. and Mrs. Allen return, and the boys are glad to welcome them back, particularly with the prospect of the present to give, and a whole holiday on the following day. It is decided that the present shall be given in the schoolroom at twelve o'clock on the following day, and Mr. Robinson and Garth are busy with preparations for the orderly arrangement of the plans for to-morrow, when the servant comes in and speaks to Mr. Littlejohn, who at once calls out the message—

"Mr. Allen wants Walton immediately in his study."

So soon! Walton starts up, and then drops back on to the bench as if unable to obey the dread summons.

"Make haste," says Mr. Littlejohn; "don't keep Mr. Allen waiting, and there isn't much time before tea."

Thus admonished, Walton rises and goes slowly out of the room, while some of the boys who have heard and seen, look at each other in wonderment. Walton in a scrape already; what will become of him to-morrow, then!

CHAPTER XXII.

A HARD CASE.

WALTON presents himself in Mr. Allen's study with a most guilty air of embarrassment, as the master (who has been rather worried by the boy's letter) begins to investigate the case, after waiting for a moment to see if Walton will speak first. But Walton is unlucky in his manner, for he has neither the brazen effrontery of Wilson nor the frank simplicity of Jim; and, as he stands silently by the master's chair, he looks guilty and frightened.

"You wrote me a letter," begins Mr. Allen, glancing quickly at the boy, "and I was unable to understand your reason for so anxiously wishing for five shillings. Are you again in debt?"

"No, sir."

"Take your hands out of your pockets when you are talking to me. You were wanting five shillings. From the tone of your letter, you seemed exceedingly anxious to have the money. Was that not so?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have, I know, a great horror of the cane, and yet so earnestly did you request the sum you mentioned, that you were willing to receive a caning from Mr. Robinson rather than not have the money. Is that true?"

"Yes, sir."

"And yet you are not in debt?"

"No, sir."

"Come nearer and look at me when you answer, Walton. Are you speaking the absolute truth?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then what did you want that five shillings for?"

Walton's head droops, and he murmurs something that Mr. Allen cannot hear.

"Speak up, and answer me frankly, my boy. You have already experienced that I am not such a very hard master as you fancied, and should this time show more confidence in me. If you would tell me of your own accord, I should not have to put all these questions. What has been your trouble this time?"

Then Walton gathers courage, and says—

"I'm so sorry, sir. I wish I could tell you; but I can't."

"Did you expect me to let you have five shillings without asking any questions as to what you were going to do with it?"

"I hoped you might, sir, if I had another punishment."

"You forget I do not punish you in anger, but to teach you to remember, and prepare you for the lessons of life. Did you think that the moment you were inconvenienced by the punishment I had given, you could escape from it by writing me such a letter? Really, Walton, I do not know what to think of such conduct!"

"Please, sir, I didn't want it for any harm — Jim knows——"

"Leave Jim out of the matter," says Mr. Allen quickly;

"this is entirely between you and me. Have you had any trouble with Hicks?"

"No, sir."

"Or with Job Wright?"

"No, sir."

"Or with any of your schoolfellows?"

Trouble! Yes, he has had trouble enough with them, but not of the kind Mr. Allen means; and, after a slight pause, he answers again—

"No, sir."

"Then what was this terrible necessity for five shillings?"

"You'll know—soon, sir. Indeed, *indeed*, I can't tell you now."

Walton is so terribly afraid the master may guess the reason, and that he will be suspected of letting out the secret, that he hardly ventures to say as much as he might in his own defence, and it is not likely that such a lame excuse would satisfy his questioner. If Walton ventured to say that he could not betray a secret in which the whole school had a part, he would be at once dismissed, but he does not dare to say so much, and can only think of his former statement—"Jim knows."

"I will have no third person brought into this discussion, and so I warn you. Jim helped you once, and brought you to me. In that he did the best he could; but such a thing cannot happen twice, and I now expect you to act and speak for yourself. Have you any intention of answering my question?"

Walton, driven to his wits' end, can only murmur, "No, sir," and wait for the sky to fall.

It seems a long time to him before Mr. Allen speaks again.

"The tea-bell will ring in five minutes. You will go in to tea, but immediately afterwards you will go to bed, and to-morrow you will have an imposition to write. Also, as you seem so wanting in sincerity and respect for my authority, I forbid you to speak to any boy in the school on any subject whatsoever, and shall send word that, until I give them leave, no boy shall speak to you. You understand what I say, Walton? And in the case of Jim Harrington, I shall give him an imposition if I find that he disobeys this order."

The sky has fallen, as far as Walton is concerned, and he leaves the study with a stunned feeling, yet withal a glad consciousness that he is not the culprit Mr. Allen believes him to be, and that, perhaps, to-morrow his innocence may be re-established, and his character cleared of all the dreadful things of which the boys and the master seem to think him capable.

He goes up to try to get the stains of ink from his hands before tea; then, when the bell rings, he goes down, and meets Jim in the doorway.

"What was it? All right, I hope?" whispers Jim cheerily.

But Walton shakes his head, and makes no answer.

"Was he cross? Anything fresh?" demands Jim with sympathy; but Walton slips away from him without a word, and grace is said.

Then Mr. Littlejohn looks round. "Mr. Allen wishes me to say that he is sorry his return should immediately be

followed by a punishment, but in this case it appears unavoidable. He desires that no boy shall speak to Walton, or listen to him should he speak, and that this punishment shall continue until permission is again given to Walton to associate with you all as before."

Jim looks across at Walton with a start as the first words are spoken. His indignant expression is not unnoticed, and Mr. Littlejohn continues gravely, saying what he had before intended to keep for Jim's private ear.

"In the case of Jim Harrington, Mr. Allen says that, to ensure this order being kept, he will be obliged to give Harrington an imposition each time that it is broken. He trusts that you will all regard his wishes in this matter."

Jim has flushed crimson, and then turned pale with anger, and the boys near hear him mutter, "I don't care. I *will* speak to him, if I get an impot for every word!"

After tea, as Walton is trying to get, unnoticed, out of the crowd of boys, he finds Jim at his elbow.

"Alf, what is it? Isn't it a mistake? I'm *sure* there's something wrong about it all."

But Walton shakes his head, and tries to get away.

Jim, not knowing that he is going to bed, holds on to him, and continues to put questions, to which Walton will not respond even by signs.

"Jim!" and the boys start a little, for it is Mr. Allen who stands in the passage. "Are you openly disobeying me? Have you been told my wishes about Walton?"

"Yes, sir; but——"

"You can make no excuses. You will write out fifty lines between now and breakfast to-morrow. Ask Mr.

means that the best half of the school will uphold him also in case of need.

At eleven o'clock, preparations began in the schoolroom. The clock is put on the table and covered with a cloth, and the boys give an extra scrub to their hands before they come in for the final ceremony. Then Mr. Robinson, Mr. Littlejohn, and Mr. Roberts (who is staying on to spare Mr. Allen any possible fatigue) come into the schoolroom, and at twelve o'clock Mr. and Mrs. Allen are shown in by William.

The idea of a present to himself has never entered Mr. Allen's mind until this moment, but as he sees the cloth on the table, he changes colour. When he and Mrs. Allen are seated at the end of the long schoolroom, Garth comes forward and makes a somewhat lame and boyish speech of congratulation, asking Mr. Allen to accept at the same time a small token of his pupils' regard, and he hands the master a paper with the signatures of all the subscribers. It is arranged in alphabetical order, and Mr. Allen's first glance is at W, where Walton's name is not, a blank space making the omission as conspicuous as possible.

With a pang of self-reproach the master realises the reason of Walton's earnest request for money, and of his obstinacy in refusing to explain its object. He looks away from Garth, who is still speaking, and sees a forlorn figure in a far corner, the only boy who has no part in this imposing ceremony, and his heart is grieved at the thought that he has added a yet heavier burden to the already sufficiently punished boy.

"I thank you all, boys, most truly for your kind thought

of me," he says, as soon as Garth is silent, "and also for this very handsome clock, which Mrs. Allen and I—and Fabius after us—will always value as a token of the good-will my pupils have felt for me. This is a most gratifying occasion to us, and I have only one cause for regret. There is a boy whose name is not on this paper. I wish that boy to come to me."

It takes some moments for Walton to come forward, but when he does Mr. Allen lays a hand on his shoulder.

"Was it for *this* you wanted the money, Walton?"

"Yes, sir. I couldn't tell you, could I?"

Mr. Allen smiles a little, but clears his throat before continuing to speak.

"I do not think that, as a rule, reproof or praise should be administered too publicly, but in this case I feel some explanation is due to Walton. Some weeks ago this boy got into difficulties through breaking the rules. He came to me, and, as a punishment, and in order to impress upon him the true value of money, I forbade his having any for the rest of the term, and he promised me neither to borrow nor to go into debt. A few days ago I received a letter from him, which, at the time, I could not understand. It asked if the punishment might be changed, and whether he might be allowed a certain sum of money and a caning instead. Not understanding such a request, I did not grant it; but yesterday, soon after my arrival, I sent for Walton, about whom I had been rather anxious, and questioned him. As he refused to tell me why he wanted the money, I too hastily concluded it was for some unworthy purpose, and made the punishment still more severe. I must now, before

you all, say that I regret that Walton was sent to Coventry by my order, and that I have more satisfaction from his conduct, from the manner in which he kept his promise to me and his word to you, even under most trying circumstances, than if he had given me the grandest present in the world. I am truly sorry, my dear boy, that you have been made to suffer, but I can only say that your conduct has been such as to give me the greatest hopes for your future. Jim Harrington has also been punished for his zealous championship of the friend whom he knew to be innocent, and I wish to say before you all that I am glad to see boys who are affectionate enough to suffer for each other, as our young Damon and Pythias have done here. To the whole school I owe many thanks for kind consideration and good conduct during my severe illness, and I trust that the good conduct will continue, even though I am again among you, and able once more to take my share in the work. I thank you all most sincerely, for myself and for Mrs. Allen."

This long speech has been heard in breathless silence, but at the end the boys break into long and loud applause. Yet to some of them it is rather a blow to find that Walton, who has not given a penny towards the clock, whose name is not in the list, and who has been creeping about silent and despised all the morning, now occupies a far more prominent position in Mr. Allen's speech than the givers of the clock. This is not what they had hoped or intended, and they feel crestfallen and annoyed. Mr. Allen, however, does not know all this, and Walton is far too happy to trouble himself about it, for Garth comes up at once and says how sorry

he is that he has made so many unkind speeches to him, and more than one boy follows Garth's example. Altogether Walton is a very happy boy. The miserable morning is forgotten, and all the rest of the day he is petted and fêted by the best set of boys in the school.

A year—even a few months ago—such treatment would have turned Walton's head, and made him think himself the best and wisest of mortals. But the discipline of the last few weeks has worked wonders, and Jim begins to feel very proud of his friend.

"Such a fuss about nothing!" remarks Wilson in great disgust. "And when all's said and done, I don't see that he's been anything so wonderful."

"Of course you don't," says Garth. "It would be very odd if you did. Fancy *you* offering to take a caning rather than not give Mr. Allen a present, and just think of *you* not telling one word about the present; yet he did it for us, who had been so unkind to him."

"Of course, he was afraid to blab!"

"You weren't about that cupboard business at the beginning of the term," says Jim quickly.

"Well, as I said before, I don't see that Walton's done anything very wonderful; only just what he ought, and no more."

"Only just what Wilson always does, for instance," retorts Jim. "What a pattern you set us, Wilson; and how unfortunate it is that we don't all follow it!"

"Shut up, Harrington! Didn't some one call you 'Longtongue?'"

"Yes, ages ago; but if any one said so now, I'd——"

"I say," breaks in Garth, "are you fellows going to waste the whole holiday in gabbling, like a lot of schoolgirls? I'm going out, and if any one wants a game they'd better follow me."

Which Jim very sensibly does, to Garth's satisfaction and Wilson's disappointment, who had hoped to "get a rise" out of "Longtongue."

CHAPTER XXIV.

HOLIDAY WORK.

MR. ALLEN'S father kept a little book, in which he wrote any maxims that happened to occur to him during his experience as schoolmaster. One of these, written rather large in red ink, but now from age faded to a pale brown, contains these words—"Give boys a holiday, and they work at mischief." Mr. Allen the elder had proved the truth of this saying, and his son is now to go through the same experience.

The turning out, during some spare time that afternoon, of Wilson's locker brings to light a parcel, long forgotten—one which was brought to him by Job Wright, and has lain there ever since.

"The very thing!" says Clark, as he holds up various fireworks of different makers. "Let's ask Mr. Allen if we may let them off in the yard. He can look out and see them."

"No," answers Wilson quickly; "I didn't buy them for him. I bought them for my own amusement. Besides, he might ask how I came by them, and I shouldn't like to say. We'll just let them off quietly by ourselves."

"All right, but fireworks aren't usually very *quiet* in going off," remarks Clark drily.

"You know what I mean; the only thing is, where are

we to do it? It is a pity to have to let them off in daylight, but at night—there's nowhere but the dormitory."

"That's dangerous," says Clark, "besides being noisy. You'd be found out at once, and there's the smell, too. I'd rather run the risk of Mr. Allen's questions."

"Well, I wouldn't, and they're my fireworks. I don't think he treated us nicely, setting Walton up in the way he did, when Walton had never given a penny to the clock, and we had."

"Well, he hadn't any money to give, so he couldn't, and you gave the smallest sum you could. But about these fireworks—it's a pity not to let them off."

"Oh, they shall be let off, never fear. I have it! The carpenter's shop is the very place for it, if we can get in there after dark. Come and let us look at it, and then, if we can manage, we'll begin to prepare. Shall we get any of the others?"

"It's no fun if we haven't an audience. Who shall we have?"

"I'll tell you who we *won't* have, and that is Walton, or that young prig Jim Harrington, or Garth, or Crofts, or any of that lot. We might have Moss, and Wray, and Adams, and Measor, and perhaps the Points of the Compass."

"That will be eight with you and me. Quite enough for plenty of fun."

The boys go off immediately to inspect the carpenter's premises, a shed for wood and a tool-house, containing a carpenter's bench and tool-chest, also plenty of shavings and sawdust covering the floor. The door is locked with a padlock, but it does not require much strength to remove

one of the staples; therefore Wilson and Clark can enter without difficulty.

"It isn't safe here, either," objects Clark; "we must be content with the shed outside."

"No, the shed won't do; it can be seen from the house. Some one would be certain to notice. We can sweep some of this mess away, and make it quite safe. I'll see about that, Clark, if you'll arrange about the other fellows meeting us here."

So, somewhat unwillingly, Clark gives way, and goes off to invite the select few, who all accept the invitation with flattering eagerness.

Soon after dusk the boys slip away one by one, and meet outside the carpenter's workshop, where they are followed a moment later by Wilson and Clark with two boxes of matches and the parcel of fireworks. Good fireworks are expensive things, but Wilson's money has been laid out to the best advantage with regard to quantity, and not quality. A shilling catherine-wheel is the chief attraction of this evening's display, but there are also some wonderful-looking rockets and squibs. Crackers have not been bought on account of the noise.

Wilson, as the host, undertakes to let off the catherine-wheel, and thus open the proceedings; but Moss, who is fond of meddling and has brought his own matchbox, secures one of the squibs unseen by Wilson or Clark.

There is the usual difficulty of fastening the catherine-wheel to the stick, and when that is done the paper is found to be damp, and several matches are burnt before there is any sign of the wheel doing anything more than spluttering

in a sullen manner, and it only revolves when spun by the hand.

Moss now creates a diversion by setting fire to his squib, but it does not light easily, and he drops it just at the critical moment. Hastily picking it up, the squib suddenly goes off at the end he is holding, and the sparks fizz out into his hand, making him drop it again with a cry of pain. At this moment the catherine-wheel makes up its mind to turn, and does so with a rapidity that startles Wilson, who finds himself suddenly in the midst of a shower of sparks. The stick to which it is fastened is shorter than is quite comfortable for the holder, and at last Wilson is obliged to throw it down, where it continues to fizz to the end, when a final *bang* makes them all jump.

Clark has just before set light to a rocket, which goes off more rapidly than he has expected. He lets go, and there is a rush to the door, for the blazing firework rushes here and there, up and down, scattering sparks around, and every boy is anxious to get away from close quarters with such a very aggressive and dangerous neighbour. Out they all rush, at first laughing, but soon the laughter dies away, and dire dismay follows.

Wilson had contented himself with sweeping the sawdust and shavings into a corner, and these have now caught fire; nor is this all, for the remaining fireworks lying on the floor in their paper are also alight, and have joined the first rocket in its wild career round and round the workshop.

"What shall we do now?" gasps Clark.

"Get in as quick as we can, and wash the smoke from our

hands," answers Wilson; and the boys creep back as they came, leaving the workshop to its fate.

Very soon the flames attract the servants' attention, and Mr. Robinson fortunately hears of it before Mr. Allen. He goes off at once, not to tell his chief, but to ask as a favour that he will for the present kindly stay in his room, it being on the side of the house away from the fire; and, thinking that some other surprise may be in store for him, Mr. Allen immediately consents.

Mr. Roberts goes out with William and some of the men, and works hard to get the fire under; but all efforts to save the carpenter's shop are vain, and the only thing they can do is to watch with the greatest care that none of the sparks should set fire to the house itself, and in this they succeed, in spite of a fresh breeze that seems anxious to carry the burning shavings in that direction.

Not until it is over, and the danger past, does Mr. Robinson return to Mr. Allen, and tell him that there has been a small conflagration, which has been put out without any more serious injury than the loss of all the tools and the burning of the carpenter's workshop.

Mr. Allen makes no attempt to see to anything himself, but leaves all in Mr. Robinson's hands, and, as it is now getting late, there is no investigation that evening as to the cause of the fire. William, however, when he looks over the boys' coats and trousers, soon finds that eight of them have a curious smell of smoke, and on closer examination there can clearly be seen the marks of fire, while Wilson's are covered with brown spots of scorch where the sparks have fallen upon him.

CHAPTER XXV.

ORDEAL BY FIRE.

"CAN any boy explain how the carpenter's shop caught fire last night?" asks Mr. Robinson next day.

There is no answer.

"Garth, come here."

Garth at once steps forward, his head erect, and his grey eyes steadily fixed on the master.

"Do you know how it happened?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know whether any boys were out last evening?'

"I don't *know* anything about it, sir."

"You may go back. Now, boys, attend to me. I have reason to believe that some of you were responsible for the mischief done last night. If all those who had a hand in it will come forward and take their punishment like honourable boys, we shall not think much the worse of them, in spite of the alarm, annoyance, and waste of money their mischief has caused. If, however, the real culprits will not come forward, I shall have to punish the whole school."

There is a pause and a rustle among the expectant boys. Clark looks round. He cannot see Wilson from his seat, but he can see Moss, and they exchange rapid glances. Then Clark leaves his place, and comes forward; Moss

follows, and from different parts of the room the boys creep sheepishly up to the master's desk.

Mr. Robinson looks at the boys before him, of whom Clark is the eldest, and has been longest at school.

"You, Clark, shall speak for the others," he says.

"Yes, sir," says Clark humbly.

"How came you boys to set the workshop on fire?"

"We—it was—there were—fireworks, sir."

"Ah! And why did you not let them off outside?"

"We—I wanted—please, sir, I don't know."

"Then they were not your fireworks?"

"I hadn't—I didn't——" stammers Clark.

"Answer me yes or no. Were they your fireworks?"

"No, sir."

"How many of you were there?"

Clark tries to give a glance behind him, but Mr. Robinson's hand is instantly upon his shoulder, as he repeats, "How many?" in a quick, stern voice.

"Eight, sir."

"Very well. Stand on one side."

Clark turns round, and changes colour as he sees only six boys behind him instead of the seven he had expected.

"There are only seven of you," says Mr. Robinson still more gravely; "I give the eighth boy one minute in which to come forward."

Oh, those sixty seconds! To whom do they seem longest—to the master, who, with his eyes on the clock, is earnestly praying that the boy may have courage given him to come forward; or to Clark and his fellow-sinners, who

stand with hanging heads; or to the boy who sits still in his place, and lets the precious moments go by?

Sixty-five seconds does Mr. Robinson wait, then he says slowly and sorrowfully—

"Go back to your places, boys."

Very gladly they move away, but with a painful consciousness that everything has gone wrong.

"Only seven boys have come up for punishment instead of eight, therefore the whole school will be punished. You will all stay in on Saturday afternoon, and write out a hundred lines; also a fine of half-a-crown must be paid by each boy, that the carpenter's tools may be replaced, as he would otherwise suffer severely from their loss."

There is dismay on many faces as Mr. Robinson speaks; but though punished for no fault of their own, the only expression of anger is one long hiss that comes from the corner where Wilson has been all the time, an apparently unconcerned spectator of all that has taken place.

"Silence!" says Mr. Robinson sharply; and the morning's work begins in earnest.

Later in the day Mr. Robinson meets Garth in one of the passages, and stops him.

"You thought me hard on you this morning, Garth?"

"Yes, sir, *very* hard."

"I had my reasons. It is not fair for the eighth boy to escape punishment. As a matter of fact, his punishment should be far more severe."

"I dare say it will, sir," says Garth grimly.

"Then you know who it is?" remarks Mr. Robinson.

"No, sir. But we shall find out soon," answers Garth.

With a warning that rules should be enforced without breaking other rules, the master passes on, leaving Garth grave and thoughtful. Of course, everything shall be done in order, and that afternoon he announces that a meeting will be held in the schoolroom immediately after tea. Every boy comes at the time appointed, and there is a hush of expectation as Garth rises to speak.

"This morning one boy in this school proved himself a sneak and a coward. On Saturday, as we are to be kept in on his account, we will hold a court-martial on him, and decide upon his punishment. We shall also send him to Coventry, that he may learn that it is—besides being mean and cowardly—very bad policy to punish a number of boys in the hope of screening himself."

"All right; but 'first catch your hare,' as Mrs. Somebody says," remarks Crofts. "How are you going to find him?"

"Yes, how will you do that?" asks Wilson insolently.

"By his clothes. There will be marks of fire on them," answers Garth quietly; upon which Wilson changes colour, and is edging away, when the Captain continues—

"As you have come forward, we will look at you first, Wilson."

"No; you can take me later. I've just forgotten something. Let me out, you fellows."

But the row of boys across the door are his late companions in mischief, and they are not going to let him pass. "When we have looked at you, you may go," says Garth; and finding himself at bay, Wilson turns round and faces the three boys who are the judges. They look at his coat for a moment; then he is asked to turn round, and he does so.

"There is no need to look any further," says Garth. "Here is the hare, Crofts."

"If you're looking at these burnt places, Garth, you're all wrong," says Wilson quickly. "I lighted a match the other day, and it spluttered and burnt my things like that."

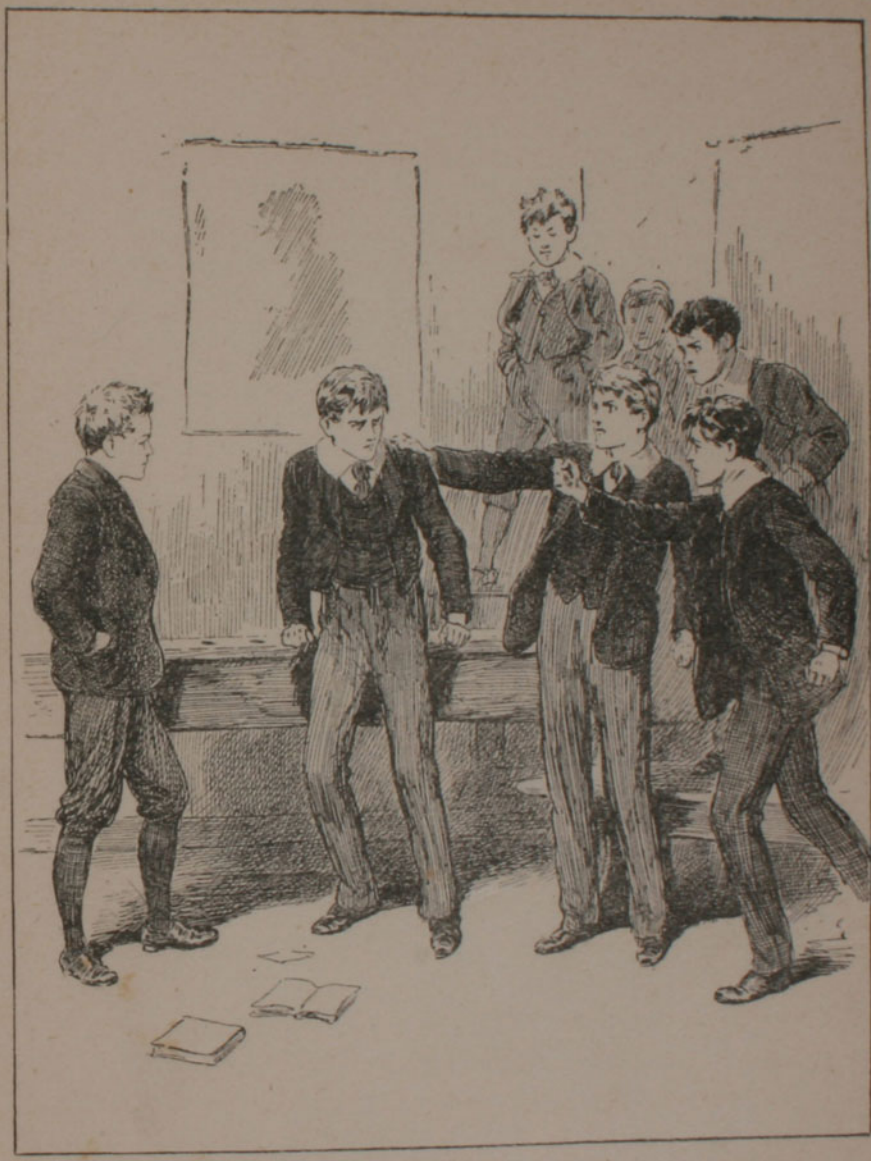
"You lighted it behind your back, I suppose?" retorts Garth; "for there is a great patch of scorch between your shoulders. It was a fine big match, the one you lighted."

"Oh, *that*—that was done by fireworks in the holidays," says Wilson.

"Indeed! And they have left the smell of scorch and gunpowder ever since! It is absurd to tell more lies; however, to make sure, we'll look at every one else."

Wilson has by this time forgotten that he had been trying to get away, and he stands there watching, as boy after boy comes up with a laugh, and twirls round before the judges. Mud, ink, dust, paint, turpentine (used for cleaning), tallow, sealing-wax, are all found in various proportions on the boys' clothes; but though there are one or two small holes from dropped matches, there is nothing in the least like the marks on Wilson's back, and, looking closer at him, Crofts finds that his hair is singed in several places. This is considered conclusive, and Garth announces that on Saturday afternoon a court-martial will be held on Wilson in the schoolroom, when his punishment will be decided; until that time the boys may treat him as they think proper.

"It's absurd and unfair!" says Wilson, with an attempt to face it out to the last. "You might as well say it was Jim Harrington, because he has got a scorched place on his left cuff."



THEY ARE NOT GOING TO LET HIM PASS.

"We all know where Harrington was last evening," says Garth. "He was here with us—with Walton, Crofts, Sexton, and with *me*. Who will answer for you? Who will say where you were?"

"I was with Clark," says Wilson angrily.

"And where were you, Clark?"

"At the fire," says Clark, with a malicious smile. "I've confessed it, and it's the truth. I was with Moss—and others—and we let off fireworks."

"Were you with Clark, then?" asks Garth.

"I meant—before the fire," says Wilson, beginning to stammer.

"Before and after, and all the time," says Clark indignantly.

"Well, no matter now. We court-martial him on Saturday," says Garth decidedly, and the meeting breaks up.

CHAPTER XXVI.

COURT-MARTIAL.

If Wilson had in the smallest degree realised what would be the result of his not coming forward to own his share in the fire, he would not only have confessed, but have gladly taken the whole blame on his shoulders. Unfortunately for his comfort, Wilson had made up his mind that the seven boys who had been foolish enough to come forward and bear the punishment, rather than make the whole school suffer, were enough to satisfy the master's anger, and that *he* would therefore escape with the innocent. He had also been prevented from coming forward the second time partly by shame for not having gone at once when the others went up, and it had also occurred to him that probably the punishment to the whole school would be lighter than that inflicted on the actual wrongdoers themselves. In this he was wrong. Mr. Robinson's punishment was as severe as he had intended it to be, and the only result to Wilson was that, instead of submitting to the master's carefully considered punishment, where sorrow for a fault went far towards atonement, he was now not only bound to submit to be punished with the others, but he had lost the sympathy usually felt among themselves for any one under punishment, and was obliged daily and hourly to face a whole school of angry boys, with none of whom had he ever been really popular.

Such a state of things would have seemed impossible to him but a little while ago, yet now Wilson, the light-hearted mischief-maker, chatter-box, and shatter-brain, found himself an outcast from school society.

The court-martial was not over, yet he was severely let alone. No one spoke to him, but at times he forgot, and began talking, when the unusual silence would remind him of his position. It was only what he had made others suffer. He had been yet more unkind in Walton's case; but Wilson could bear teasing better than Walton, and would gladly have been badgered rather than left alone with such contemptuous coldness.

The boys had written their lines and paid up their fines as best they could, and this had not made them more charitably disposed towards Wilson when they all met on Saturday afternoon, with nothing but the prospect of his punishment to take off the feeling of annoyance.

The elder boys looked rather grim, and Wilson, watching them in nervous suspense, began to feel horribly afraid of the result of the court-martial. There were no masters present to protect him. Mr. Littlejohn was writing letters in his room, Mr. Robinson was with Mr. Allen, Mr. Roberts had gone for a walk to see a cricket match played some miles away, to which several boys had hoped for leave to attend.

The school clock suddenly strikes three, and Garth looks up.

"Are you all here?"

"Yes, all," says his lieutenants Crofts and Sexton.

"Have you all got—what I told you?"

"Yes. We are all ready."

"Arrange the forms, then, as I told you," says Garth.

A square is made with four short forms, and then Garth sits down on the table at the top of the room, with his feet on a wooden chair.

"Wilson, will you stand inside those forms?"

Then Wilson makes his last blunder.

"If you don't choose to behave properly to me, I won't play with you. You don't think I'm going to mind what you fellows say or do—do you?"

With a sudden howl of wrath a dozen boys spring upon him. He is forced, not over-gently, inside the forms and held there, struggling faintly, for he is again frightened, and wishes he had disarmed them by obedience and more becoming humility.

"Has any boy evidence to give?" asks Garth, with almost magisterial dignity. "Clark, what have you to say? Was Wilson with you or not when the workshop was burnt?"

"He was," says Clark.

"Were the fireworks his or yours?"

"They were his."

"He made no secret of it?"

"Oh, no; he was awfully proud of it, and of having got them through Job Wright without being very much cheated."

Other boys also come forward, and Garth questions them. At last he turns to Wilson and asks if he has anything to say for himself; but Wilson tries to look as if he had not heard, and takes no notice of the question.

Garth then appeals to the boys to say whether Wilson is innocent or guilty, and the shout of "Guilty!" makes the

schoolroom rafters ring again, and a rather terrible silence follows, which Garth breaks a moment later.

"Wilson, you were in the workshop on Wednesday last. At your own request the fireworks, which you had bought through Job Wright, were let off in the workshop, rather than outside, as Clark wished. When the fire became serious, you and your companions ran away, giving no alarm and asking for no assistance. The result was that the workshop was quite destroyed, when you might have saved it. But it is not for all this that you are here now. When called upon by Mr. Robinson to own up, only seven boys presented themselves, though eight were known to have been concerned in the matter. The eighth boy, by not coming up when asked for, caused the whole school to suffer, and it is for this that you have been brought here this afternoon. We have, therefore, decided to punish you among ourselves, and you shall know what our opinion of your conduct is before many minutes are over. Take off his coat and waistcoat."

This is not so easily done, but at length Wilson stands with wild eyes, disordered hair, and shirt in rags, and hears the next order.

"Form two rows, and each boy take his towel. Now, Wilson, you shall run the gauntlet."

Garth starts him with a stinging flick from the towel which has been held in his hand all this time, and Wilson runs, head down, amidst a hail of lashes, from one end of the long room to the other. Here Sexton stands to turn him back, and once more he flies along the line, but only to be turned again by Crofts at the top.

The boys' voices drown his cries, but soon one boy notices that he has begun to wince, and that several red marks are visible through the rents of his shirt. Jim sees, and is suddenly smitten with pity for the helpless, hunted boy, and watching his opportunity, he springs forward as if to give a blow, but only to say in Wilson's ear, "*Lie down!*"

One startled glance into Jim's face—Jim so transformed from his usual self, with that frown between his eyes, and the drooping corners to his mouth—and Wilson drops. Not a hand is raised against him until Clark, his late companion, calls excitedly, "He hasn't had *half* enough! Flick him up there, you boys, and don't let him lie."

But the point of the towel aimed by Moss does not reach Wilson, it leaves its mark on Jim's cheek, for he has sprung between.

"I say—stop it, Garth! He's had enough!" calls Jim.

"Get out, you young meddler!" shouts Clark; "Wilson isn't your friend, that you need champion him. You have enough with Walton on your hands. Get out, I say!"

"*Garth!*" appeals Jim, "don't let them do it! If he isn't my friend, then all the more should you listen to me, as I have no reason for speaking up for him. *Garth*, stop them!"

"They won't stop, Jim. You'd better get out of the way," says Garth slowly, looking at the faces of the boys around him.

"Yes, get out of the way!" calls Clark and several others. But Jim never moves an inch. His eyes are fixed on Garth, who shows signs of uneasiness.

"If every stroke hurt him like this," says Jim, touching

his cheek, which is now smarting painfully where some of the skin has been taken off by the blow, "then he has had enough—and more than enough! Look here!"

He pulls open the tatters, and shows where Wilson's shoulders are marked, and when he touches him, Wilson winces.

"If we punish fairly," continues Jim, "we are doing good to each other and the whole school; but, if we are brutal and cruel, we are doing even worse than Wilson."

Somehow Jim, with his bright eyes, slight young figure, and one crimson, tingling cheek, standing over the prostrate boy, who has always done him more harm than any other in the school, reminds Garth of the English patron saint. He gives a short laugh, and yields.

"All right, St. George. Clear out, and take your dragon with you."

It is a happy speech. The tide of feeling turns at once in Jim's favour, and, although one or two are inclined to grumble at Harrington's impertinent meddling with everything, the room echoes with "Well done, St. George!" and Jim helps his prostrate foe to pick himself up, and leads him away.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WHAT NEXT?

"JIM—oh, Jim!—how good of you, how quick, and how kind! I shall always be your friend, Jim, for what you have done for me to-day."

"It takes two to make a friendship," says Jim shortly, "just as it does to make a quarrel. I haven't done anything out of admiration for your conduct, Wilson, for I don't admire it; but I didn't want the other fellows to feel ashamed. I was thinking quite as much of them as of you."

"Oh," says Wilson, and relapses into groaning over his back, "isn't there anything that could be put to it? It feels all on fire."

"Shall I call Mrs. Swift?"

"Oh, no, don't do that. She might ask questions. I—I believe vinegar is good."

Away goes Jim, and soon returns with a good-sized vinegar bottle, the contents of which he at once proceeds to apply to Wilson's shoulders with more goodwill than discretion. There is one shriek, sharp and involuntary, and then Jim is horrified to see Wilson writhing and biting his lips from the pain he is enduring.

"Oh, Wilson, I *am* sorry! Does it hurt awfully? I'll fetch Garth," and Jim is off before Wilson can stop him.

Before Garth comes the pain is already better. The

remedy, though cruelly severe, is not altogether wrong, and when Garth appears, anxious and annoyed, he is most thankful to find Wilson better than from Jim's description he had dared to hope. There is, however, no question that Wilson is exceedingly "sore and sad," and Garth, seeing the real state of things, feels intensely thankful to Jim for his timely interference, as otherwise the results might have been far more serious. As it is, Wilson is hardly able to take his usual place at tea, so stiff does he feel; but he is quiet and makes no fuss, even when Clark, meeting him in a crowd, gives a hit with his elbow on the tenderest bruise of all.

"Let Wilson alone, Clark," calls Garth, who has been watching; "you were one of the eight yourself, so we aren't particularly grateful to you any more than to Wilson." Which snub Clark accepts in silence.

Garth and some of the other boys have been fully prepared for Wilson to complain to Mrs. Swift, or even to the masters, of the treatment he had received; but the evening passes, and not a sign from any one shows that they know what has taken place. Mrs. Swift certainly thinks the boy looks tired out, and suggests early bedtime, which he at once gratefully accepts.

When he is gone, the boys begin to discuss what is to be done next. Can his punishment be considered sufficient, or are they still to leave him at Coventry? Many are the views, and various and wonderful the reasons for them; but Garth says decidedly, "He ought to confess and say he is sorry, then we might really forgive and forget."

"Who could he confess to?"

"Mr. Robinson, before class in the morning. Of course,

he won't do it, and we shall have to put up with him as best we can. He ought to tell about it before the whole school. If he did that he might——" Garth turns, to find that Wilson is proving the proverb about listeners. He has come back to fetch a book he has forgotten, and after he has gone the subject drops.

Next day Wilson tries to see Mr. Allen, but he is told to go to Mr. Robinson about anything of importance: neither will Mr. Littlejohn nor Mr. Roberts hear him when he attempts to speak about the fire.

At last he meets Mr. Robinson in the passage, and begins—

"Please, sir, may I——"

"What is it?" asks Mr. Robinson quickly, as if in a hurry.

"I—I want to tell you, sir, about that fire——"

But Mr. Robinson at once cuts him short.

"I can listen to you to-morrow before school if you have anything to say to me, but not now." And he goes away.

But, later, Wilson sees him sitting on the playground wall in earnest conversation with Garth, Jim, Walton, Crofts, and Sexton, who seem to be discussing some matter of importance, though later he found they were only talking over an old cricket match.

Next day Wilson tries to screw up his courage, but it fails him at the very moment it is most required, and the opportunity does not return. In the meantime Wilson is still kept at arm's length by his schoolfellows, and is not allowed to join in the games, nor will any boy speak to him when it can be avoided. Wilson has had hopes that Jim would

take his part, and thereby induce Garth and his party to be kinder to him. From his own chosen friends Wilson knows he has nothing to hope; they are sure to be the first to throw him over, and that he is aware of this, is proved by the fact that he makes no attempt to win them, concentrating all his efforts upon Garth and Jim.

Garth receives these advances with cold politeness, Jim with only half-suppressed scorn, for they have no reason to trust Wilson's new-found humility, and it seems to them as if he was now endeavouring to find favour with the stronger party.

The holidays are coming very near, and Wilson feels that to go away and return without some explanation with his schoolfellows, will be impossible. He therefore takes the first opportunity when the boys he is most anxious to please are all together, and, breaking in upon them suddenly, demands, "I say, I wish you'd tell me what you want me to do. I'm very sorry, and I didn't say a word, though you *did* half flay me; and yet when I come near, you all move away and won't speak or have anything to do with me."

The boys listen with too obvious indifference, and Garth answers: "You never tried to be friends with us before. You chose your own companions, and, if they leave you, you can't expect us to show much pleasure when you want to join us. Why don't you go to Clark?"

"Because—because I—I——" Wilson can get no further, for his voice breaks, and he is nearly "being a fool," as he expresses it to himself.

"How are we to know you mean what you say?" continues Garth. "You've said so many things—told so many lies—

that we can't trust you. If you *really* mean it, you can make a public confession to Mr. Robinson to-morrow and take the punishment he will give you, and which you have jolly well earned. When you've done that we'll believe you."

"And till you *have*," adds Sexton severely, "don't keep sneaking round us, for we don't like it, and won't stand it much longer."

Wilson, however, does not move. He seems to be thinking so deeply as to have almost forgotten his surroundings, and the others go off and leave him.

"Will he do it?" says Crofts, glancing back.

"No," replies Sexton, "he hasn't any courage. Your dragon is rather a poor beast, St. George the younger."

"He will do it," says Jim.

"I'm awfully sorry for him," says Walton; "but I don't think he will, Jim."

"He will," says Jim cheerfully.

"If you make him, perhaps he will," remarks Garth rather doubtfully; "but if he *does*, I'm sorry for him. Robinson's awfully hard on that sort of thing, and he'll probably flog him."

"What—with that back?" gasps Jim, giving his cheek a rub, for there is still a red mark where he was hit.

Garth shrugs his shoulders.

"Robinson won't know, unless Wilson is hound enough to tell him. Come and look at the ruins, Sexton. I found a capital hammer yesterday—only the handle burnt, and poor old Chips nearly cried for joy when he saw it. It was an old friend, he said."

Most of the boys go off to search among the ashes for

the carpenter's lost tools, and Jim and Walton are left alone.

"You can make him confess if you try," says Walton, with supreme confidence in Jim's powers of persuasion.

"I shan't try. I *couldn't*, now that I know," replies Jim with a shudder. "It's awfully rough on Wilson; and that it's his own fault doesn't make it any pleasanter—rather the reverse. I couldn't ask him to go up and take a flogging from Mr. Robinson, when I know we beat him almost to a jelly the other day. I wish we hadn't touched him, and so does Garth now. It would have been quite enough to send him to Coventry. He's a talker, and would soon have got sick of it, and then there wouldn't have been any difficulty about the flogging. As it is—well!—I'd rather be flogged myself!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TURNING THE TABLES.

"If you please, sir, may I speak to you?"

"Certainly."

All the school is together, for prayers are just over. Immediately there is dead silence in the schoolroom, and Wilson, who stands pale and trembling before the master's desk, has to moisten his lips before he can speak another word.

"Please, sir—I was the eighth boy—the one who did not come up."

"What do you mean, Wilson? When did you not come up?"

"Please, sir, when you—when you spoke about the fire. It was my fault that the whole school was punished, and—I'm very sorry, sir."

Mr. Robinson's face grows grave and stern.

"Your sorrow comes too late, Wilson. You should have spoken before if you wished me to take at all a lenient view of your conduct. As it is, you have added meanness and deceit to your first fault. Did you think that by confessing in this manner you would be forgiven?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know what is the punishment for such faults as yours?"

Wilson's mouth forms some word, but there is no sound.

"In some cases the boy has been expelled, as being unfit to associate with others whom he might influence by his words or example."

Wilson moves from foot to foot, and turns paler, if possible, than before.

"In your case, however, I have no doubt Mr. Allen will be more lenient, and will substitute a flogging instead of the disgrace of expelling you. As soon as school is over you will come to me in the study. Now go back to your place."

And Wilson goes back, thankful that the ordeal is over, but full of dread of that which is to come. As for Jim, he is so absent and forgetful that morning that Mr. Roberts is almost angry with him, and Mr. Robinson finds Garth little better, as he seems to be too occupied with his own thoughts to have any room left for his lessons.

Mr. Robinson's class breaks up first, and he then asks Mr. Littlejohn to send Wilson to him in Mr. Allen's study.

On hearing this order, Jim springs up in his place and begs Mr. Roberts to let him go, but the master, being already somewhat annoyed with him, tells him to sit down.

For a moment Jim hesitates. Then he says hastily, "I *can't*, sir—you don't know—I'd rather be flogged myself!" and bolts out of the room after Wilson.

Garth is there before him, so that when Mr. Robinson opens the door and looks round for Wilson, he finds three boys instead of one.

"Garth! Jim! what are you doing here? This has nothing to do with you. Go back, and leave Wilson to me."

"I beg your pardon, sir," says Garth earnestly; "but indeed it *has* to do with us. I told you the eighth boy would probably be punished among ourselves."

"You did; but that has nothing to do with the rules of the school. Wilson chose his part, and must take the consequences."

"But not a flogging, sir, because—on Saturday—we court-martialled him, and—and—he had to run the gauntlet in the schoolroom. I'm afraid we hurt him very badly—and, but for Jim, would have hurt him even more—so I'm sure he oughtn't to be flogged; and you wouldn't do it if you knew."

"Suppose I say there is only one alternative—to be expelled?" replies Mr. Robinson.

"Oh, no, sir! Please flog me," implores Wilson, who has not spoken before. "I don't mind the pain, and my back is better."

"I'd rather be flogged myself," says Jim earnestly. "Please, sir, can't you flog me instead?"

"Or me?" says Garth; "for I was most to blame as captain, and Jim did interfere, or Wilson would have been much more hurt."

"It seems to me that Jim is given to interfering," says the master with a slight smile; "at least, he seems to have a finger in every pie."

Jim looks rather distressed at this, so Mr. Robinson adds kindly, "As long as the interference is exerted for good no one will blame you, Jim; but take care that you always use your influence in the best way, as otherwise you incur a serious responsibility. But now, let me see this back and judge for myself."

Though comparatively well, Wilson's shoulders are not a pleasant sight, for, excepting the vinegar applied by Jim, they have received no proper treatment. There are still red and sore patches on the shoulder-blades, and Mr. Robinson gives Garth a look of sorrowful reproach.

"Will you please flog me, sir, instead of Wilson?" implores Garth, who is thoroughly ashamed, as he sees the result of the court-martial and its punishment. It had seemed so grand and just to inflict pain on Wilson when they were all angry with him and he appeared to care so little; but now, facing the after-results, it seems to Garth and Jim that the school only took a pitiful revenge for an extra task and a lost holiday, while Wilson, who has silently borne the cruelty and contempt of his schoolfellows, has come out of the business better than his judges.

"Flog me, sir," repeats Garth, but Mr. Robinson shakes his head.

"No, Garth, that cannot be done. Punishment is not to be transferred in this manner. But clearly Wilson has *had* the flogging, and a worse one than I could have given him, so that part is over. He must, however, submit to an imposition which will keep him out of mischief for some time. Garth and Jim may stay with me, and you, Wilson, may go to Mrs. Swift, and she will give you some ointment which will soon heal up those places, so that we may have you with a whole skin as soon as possible. Then you can go to your room and think seriously for a quarter of an hour over the trouble you have brought upon yourself and others. This pain and trouble will not have been in vain if it will only make you more thoughtful and considerate for others. You

have been the worst tease and tormentor in the school this term, and now you have experienced some of your own kind of treatment, only to a more severe degree, as you had the whole school against you. When you have considered all this you may return to the schoolroom."

Wilson stands for a moment motionless. Then he looks up, and there are tears in his eyes as he falters, "Please, sir, I—I'm so much obliged—I hope I shall do better—I'll try—and if Garth and Harrington will be kind and help me——"

"You have had a proof of their willingness to help you in their coming here now," says Mr. Robinson, as Wilson pauses; "but it is not surprising that neither Garth nor Jim are ready to come forward with offers of friendship until you have given sufficient proof that you mean to alter your ways. It depends, therefore, upon yourself, Wilson, whether you can win and keep the friendship of your schoolfellows, and you should bear that in mind for the future."

"Thank you, sir. I'll try. And thank you, Garth and Harrington, for helping me now. I hope I shouldn't have told—but, if I'd been flogged—I might have done it, and you've saved me all that besides the pain. I hope you'll shake hands some day—when you know——" And breaking off suddenly, Wilson rushes off to Mrs. Swift, leaving the other boys with Mr. Robinson.

What he says to them both, or to Garth after he has dismissed Jim, is never known; all that can be gathered is that when Garth reappears his ears are hot and seem to tingle with the master's words.

"Been all this time with Robinson?" asks Sexton.

"Yes," replies Garth shortly.

"Has he flogged Wilson?"

"No—seeing that we had done it for him."

"Oh! Then why were you so long?"

"He was talking."

"*Talking?* What about?"

"Oh! lots of things; rules, and bullying, and example, and—everything. He said that Jim was worth the whole kit of us."

"*Did* he? What cheek! How did he make that out?"

"He said—you may laugh, but it's true, Sexton—that Jim has more real influence than any of us, though he is younger; and he always uses it for good, but without being a prig—only just as a matter of course. That's just why he has so much influence, I suppose."

But Sexton does not laugh; he only looks thoughtful.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A NEW LEAF.

IT would require little short of a miracle to turn a number of wild, unruly, well-meaning but thoughtless boys, into a well-behaved, rule-keeping, careful set of young gentlemen, and I am not sure that the change would be desirable if it were possible.

The boys at Mr. Allen's continue, much as before, to blunder through their lessons as best they can, to throw themselves heart and soul into their games, to be noisy, forgetful, careless, and idle; but, for all this, a stronger spirit of kindness seems to be among them.

Garth seems more wide awake; and when Clark is seen "tormenting a kid," he is shouted at to "Stop that!" and does not venture to dispute the order.

Wilson's time is occupied with his imposition, and, though no longer at Coventry, most of the boys let him alone, so that he has ample time for reflection. But, as the days go by, Garth, who has been silently watching him, comes forward with an offer of help. Shall he read out the verses that have to be copied? Wilson refuses, though with gratitude, but Garth insists; and the boys, returning to the schoolroom from the playground, are astonished to find *Garth* helping Wilson. If it had been Jim who had come to the rescue, they would not have felt any surprise.

So Garth helps, and Jim helps; and, presently, Sexton and Crofts offer to relieve the others; so, when Wilson's hand feels stiff and tired, some one is sure to be willing to take his pen for a short time to give him a rest. By this means Wilson's task is over sooner than Mr. Robinson has anticipated, and the boy gives it in with a radiant face.

"You have worked hard, Wilson, to get it done so soon?"

"Yes, sir; but the others helped me. They've been very kind about it; and I'm to be in the last football game on Wednesday, if you'll give me leave to play."

"I have great pleasure in doing so, and we will come and look on; so I hope you will distinguish yourself."

The weather on Wednesday is everything that it ought to be, which it rarely is in our dear little island; but, happily, there are exceptions even to the general badness of the weather. The boys are in the happiest excitement over their game; Mr. and Mrs. Allen are looking on; Major Harrington with Maidie and Tot (or Lotty, as we ought to call her now) are among the few spectators; also Lord Riversmere from Rushtonbury, who has just returned from a long sojourn on the Continent, and has looked in to see his young friend Jim play football. It is at one of the most exciting moments of the game that Mrs. Swift, her cap half off her head, her collar all disarranged, and the wildest look of gladness in her face, comes running out of the house.

"He's come! he's here!" she says excitedly. "Walking on his feet as well as ever, and *grown*"—but before the startled company can imagine *who* has come, some one rushes out of the side door, and the next moment Mrs. Allen is in the arms of her son Fabius.

And *such* a Fabius! Not the pale, invalid boy, who left them (it seems so long ago now) in search of health, but a tall—very tall—brown-faced young man, who soon proves that he is still a boy in spite of his long legs and traveller's experience. Behind him comes Mr. Michael Sedges, with whom he has been living as a guest, and the white clothes and dark face of Mr. Sedges' Indian servant can be seen in the doorway.

Garth has just been on the point of kicking a splendid goal for his side, when he happens to look round. He kicks wildly, and, disregarding the shouts of his fellow-players, runs off to the house to shake hands with the newcomer, who greets him warmly.

Jim is only a few steps behind, and as he comes up Mr. Sedges is explaining their unexpected return.

"The fact is, Mr. Allen, the moment the news came of your illness, this fellow began to show such unmistakable signs of home-sickness, or whatever you choose to call it, that my chief anxiety was to get off as soon as we could for England, before the good he had got from his travels had been all undone. So, here we are, and not altogether sorry to be in England again. He's been a good boy, Mr. Allen, and I shall never wish for a pleasanter travelling companion, for he didn't grumble when we had to rough it, and was bright and cheery all the time. I hope *you* are all right now, my dear sir?"

While Mr. Allen is answering inquiries about his health, Jim makes his way to Fabius and takes hold of his hand.

"Well, young shaver!" says Fabius, looking down from his six feet of height to Jim's wondering, upturned face.

"How's Geoff? I missed some letters by coming off in this way, but Mr. Sedges will have them forwarded with his. I think I must have missed a letter from Geoff."

"Geoff's all right. Getting on very well, and he likes Blank."

"Of course he does. Every decent fellow likes his own school. You'll have to tell me lots, though, Jim—you and Garth. About that rascal who hid, and the burglar—I want to hear it all."

"All right; only you'll have to sit while we tell, for we can't break our necks looking up at a Maypole," laughs Jim, who has been rather taken aback at his friend's height.

"All right, my son. But if you ever had the pleasure of being on your back for a year, Jim, I think even you'd begin to grow, you shrimp!"

Then Mrs. Allen claims her boy's attention, and Mr. Sedges goes up to his nephew, Lord Riversmere.

"Think you can put me up for a few weeks, Riversmere? Attarah and me, you know. Thank'ee. We won't give trouble. Do you know—that boy there, Fabius—I'm not generally taken with boys, though I know one or two capital ones; but *he's* one in a hundred—no, in a thousand. He'll make such a schoolmaster——"

"If he ever is one," says Lord Riversmere doubtfully.

"I tell you he'll make a schoolmaster of whom all his friends will be proud. His scholars will worship him, and his school will flourish——"

"And again, I say *if*. I doubt his ever consenting to the drudgery of such a life."

"He has doubted it too; but when news came of his

father's illness, he made up his mind then and there. He came and told me, and he will not turn back. I'm sorry we interrupted the boys' game; but as it seems to have come to an end, we will be off and see how Rushtonbury will take my sudden return."

For Lord Rushtonbury and Mr. Michael Sedges are brothers.

The game of football is not resumed, for the boys' excitement is now all turned into another channel.

"I wish we could do something very grand, just to show how glad we are!" says Jim.

"If we could make a bonfire, or let off some fire——" Sexton is beginning to say, but stops with a hasty glance at Wilson, who has turned red.

"You haven't got any more, have you, Wilson?" asks Clark; but his voice is drowned amid a chorus of suggestions.

"We might, perhaps, get leave to buy some," Crofts remarks, when there is comparative silence; "and then we could invite all the masters, and Fabius and Mrs. Allen. It would be fun—but we're all so short of money. We couldn't afford anything worth looking at."

"So much the better," says Garth decidedly; "do you think, when Fabius has just come back, that Mr. and Mrs. Allen will care to look at a few sparks, when they are longing to look at Fabius and hear all he has to tell them? There is only one thing we *can* do that will really give them the greatest satisfaction."

"What?"

"Oh, dear! not another present," says one boy ruefully;

"I haven't more than sixpence, and I owe a penny halfpenny of that."

"So you do, so stump up," demands the creditor.

"No, not a present—nothing in the least interesting or exciting," continues Garth. "It's only that we shall keep as quiet as we can, and be extra careful about rules—just as when Mr. Allen was ill—and then they can all have a very happy, quiet evening together."

"But that's so *dull*," whines somebody.

"I can't help it—that's what we've got to do now," says Garth.

And, rather to his surprise, the boys all submit without much grumbling.

CHAPTER XXX.

GOOD-BYE.

IT is the last day of the term, and to-morrow all the boys return home for the holidays. There are no lessons, but much packing goes on, and the boys assemble in knots to talk over the past and the future with the gravity and importance of politicians.

There is also a little air of mystery about some of the boys, and Clark sits apart in an abstracted manner.

"Composing," whispers Walton.

"Let's go and see what it is," suggests Jim; but, to his surprise, Walton seems disinclined to move, so Jim remains to keep him company.

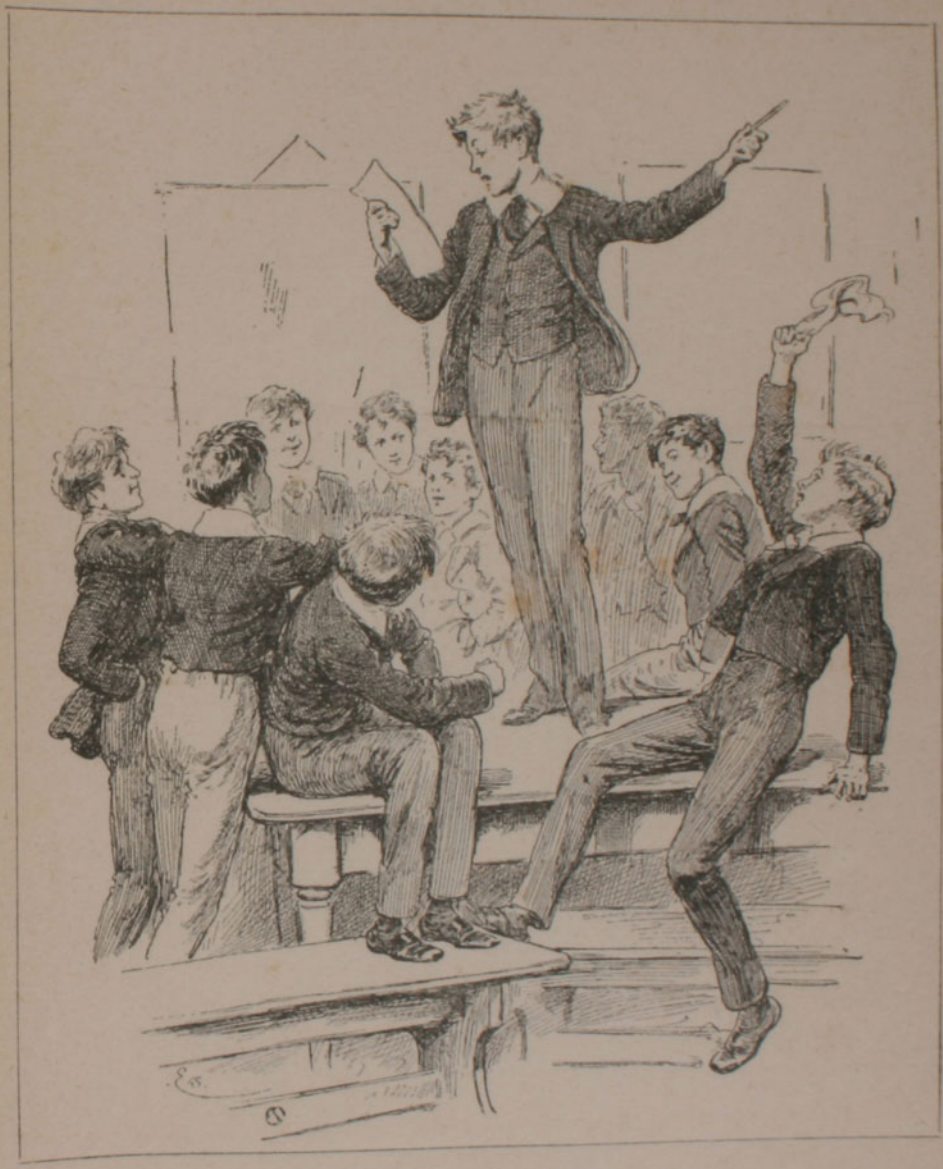
"You're coming to see me for a few days this holiday, aren't you?" says Alfred wistfully.

"Yes, I shall be very glad if they'll let me come," answers Jim readily; "and you're coming to us, too."

"And, oh, Jim, what *do* you think? Mother means to take a house in Rushton—at least, outside Rushton, nearer your way—for the summer, and to stay on if she likes it, and then we can meet very often."

Presently Clark rises and nods to Garth, who thumps upon the table. There is silence immediately, and the captain says—

"Jim Harrington, will you listen to an ode composed in



CLARK READS THE "ODE" TO THE BOYS.

your honour by our poet laureate, Mr. Fred Clark. Silence, if you please. Fire away, Clark!"

And the poet read as follows:—

"There was one little Jim,
'Tis reported of him
To his credit as long as he lives,
That he always is kind
To each kid he can find,
And an injury always forgives.

"His relations are proud
To hear praises so loud,
But feel them no more than his due,
Who always is ready,
With counsel so steady
To help a friend out of a stew.
Ahoo!
Without our Jim what should we do?"

Garth reads this elegant attempt at parody in a feeling tone, and Jim shouts with laughter, when, to his surprise, a very nice lawn tennis racket is put on the table before him, and Garth tells him it is a small offering from his school-fellows.

All but Walton—poor Walton, who has no money—have given, if only a penny or two; but Walton, who longed most of all to give, has been unable to do so.

Jim is much delighted with the racket, but still more with the kind feeling that has prompted the gift, and he says earnestly—

"Oh, I say! it's *awfully* good of you all to spend your money on me, and just now, too, when we've got so little!

Would you mind giving me a copy of the 'ode,' Clark? I really think my relations would like to see it."

"Of course, you're to have a copy," says Clark. "Here it is. You can have it framed, Jim, and hang it up in your room, as people do their certificates of merit or prize-cards of ploughing matches or flower shows. It is your first letter of recommendation."

"And won't be your last, Jim; I'm sure of that," says Garth warmly.

A very strong and lasting friendship has sprung up between the younger boy and the Captain, and it is one that will last through life. Walton is a little inclined to feel jealous at times, but he struggles against it; and as Jim is careful never to hurt his feelings, and Garth is willing to accept him as part of Jim—a small and rather insignificant part, but still belonging to him—there is no real pain given, and in time Garth comes to see some of Walton's good qualities.

Fabius, sitting in his father's study that evening, mentions the gift of the racket, much to Mr. Allen's amusement and interest.

"It is the old matter of the 'little leaven,'" he says. "If only each boy would realise how much good or how much harm he can do to those about him, there might be less need of rules or punishment. Jim has taught me many things since he came here first, and I shall always be proud and glad to have had him for my pupil."

Then Fabius gets a copy of the "ode" for his father to see, and they laugh over it together and talk over plans for the future.

The next morning Major Harrington and Geoff come to fetch Jim from school, and all are glad to see Geoff again, and notice how he has grown and improved in looks since he went to Blank. He is, of course, most anxious to see his old friend Fabius again, and find out for himself the wonderful improvement in the boy whom he last saw on board ship—an invalid, unable to stand.

Fabius has also much to tell, and they walk round the playground while Jim and Walton are having a few last words, and Major Harrington is speaking to Mr. Allen in his study.

"It is a great pleasure to me to think that we shall, I hope and trust, keep him with us for some years longer," Mr. Allen is saying. "Geoff was a good boy, and we all loved him; but Jim is a real comfort to us. He is so bright, fearless, and truthful, with such a strong sense of duty—that strongly British characteristic of obedience to orders, which is so invaluable, and his influence and example have done good work among the boys. If I am not mistaken, there is one boy who will all his life be the better for having met your Jim."

"You mean Walton?"

"No, another boy. Walton certainly owes much to Jim, but at the moment I was thinking of Wilson."

"I am glad to hear you say all this, yet I hardly like the idea of Jim, at his age, playing such a leading part," says Major Harrington rather gravely.

"You need have no fears," replies Mr Allen; "Jim has very little idea of the real state of the case. That is the secret of it all, and the real magic of his power over the other

boys. He does not know it, and I hope and believe that this unconsciousness will last during his life."

And then Jim comes in to say good-bye. Such a bright, happy face, and such clear blue eyes look at the master fearlessly, as on the day he first entered The Birches. Geoff also comes with Fabius, and they have some more school-talk until Major Harrington is ready.

There is not one of the boys who parts from Jim with any ill-will, and most of them are glad to think they will find him in his place when the holidays are over.

"That boy reminds me of those lines of Charles Kingsley's," says Mr. Robinson in the evening, as he and Mr. Allen are talking together, Mrs. Allen and Fabius sitting near.

"What lines do you mean?" asks Mr. Allen.

"You must know them: they are often quoted."

And Mr. Robinson repeats them:—

"Do the work that's nearest,
Though it's dull at whiles,
Helping, when we meet them,
Lame dogs over stiles."

"Yes, that's just like Jim; it might be his motto," says Fabius, looking up. "And, odd though it may seem, for he's still a little chap, I always feel sorry when I say good-bye to Jim."

I hope my readers will kindly echo the same sentiment, now that we also have to say Good-bye to "Jim."

250
180
45000