

"Yes," added Jack, "and it's going to be Al, if only you and mother won't forget to keep off. I'm afraid, dad, you'd play old gooseberry with things if you *did* happen to walk over the top!"

Mr. Thompson, who was not of the slight and slim order, smiled grimly, and strolled back towards the house; whilst the two boys congratulated themselves upon the happy turn of things.

"It's very decent of your father," said Jim.

"Yes," replied the other with the impudent patronage of the youth of to-day, "he isn't half a bad sort, isn't the pater; but," he added reflectively, with the conviction born of past experience of the temper of the worthy Mr. Thompson, "you can't always say right off what way the cat'll jump, you know."

Jim was apparently thinking of something else.

"What about the porpoise?" he asked anxiously.

"Oh! you leave her to me," was the ready answer. "I know a trick that'll keep the porpoise from coming within a mile of *this* show, anyway!"

He refused to explain the trick that night, but next day, being a half-holiday and a sunny afternoon, he and his friend made their way to a disused quarry, where stones lay half buried in the rank grass, and where in one corner a stagnant pool was the home of newts and waterboatmen. A veritable paradise, this quarry, to boys who revelled in all things that swim or crawl. They turned over several stones, exposing the pale crushed grass below, putting countless insects into terrible fluster and flurry. Every now and again there was a shout, followed by an excited scuffle, and the transfer of some writhing creature to the folds of a large silk handkerchief.

And that evening Master Jack put matters before the "porpoise" in a light that, as he afterwards explained to his friend, "settled *her* from ever wanting to come clumping down on top of their cave any more."

Yet he only said:

"Look here, Jane, I don't want to frighten you for nothing, but I think I ought to tell you to be careful how you get flopping about round that cave we've dug. Fact is, there's a lot of snakes got loose inside, and they're wrigglers, and no mistake."

But that was enough. He omitted to add that the creatures were merely harmless grass snakes. Indeed, had he done so, the effect would probably have been the same. To Jane all snakes were alike; the very thought of them, as she beautifully expressed it, "gave here the fair creeps."

Unknown to themselves, there had been a silent watcher of the two lads during the past few days. In their happy lightheartedness they gave no thought save to their own affairs, and the sad, sweet face at one of the windows of the house next door—the house between those of the Thompsons and the Burtons—was all unnoticed by them. But old Mrs. Grayling, looking out from the room she rarely left, seemed to find both pain and pleasure in observing the boys; and often while there was a smile upon her lips there was a tear in her eye.

Things had prospered with the cave. It was a source of envy and delight to all the lads who were admitted to its inmost depths, and the hole in the hedge which gave into the field grew larger through constant use, for naturally none of the youngsters ever entered the garden from the legitimate end when they could do so in the other way.

It chanced that one afternoon, as the quiet watcher sat at her window, wide open to let in the soft summer air, she saw Jack rush down the garden path, and heard him give a wild whoop. In a moment the unearthly shriek was answered by one no whit more musical, and next instant young Burton pushed his way through the hedge, and was close followed by a second lad. What they said to each other it was too far for her to hear, but their evident excitement made the old lady smile.