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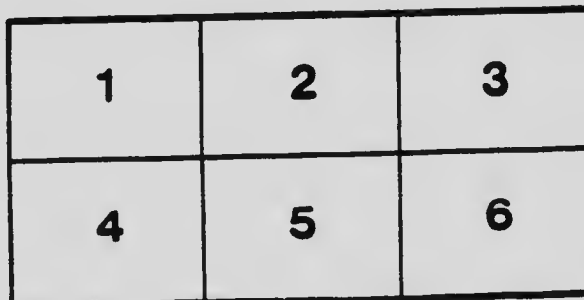
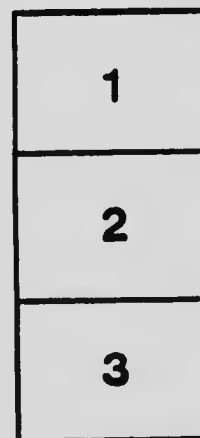
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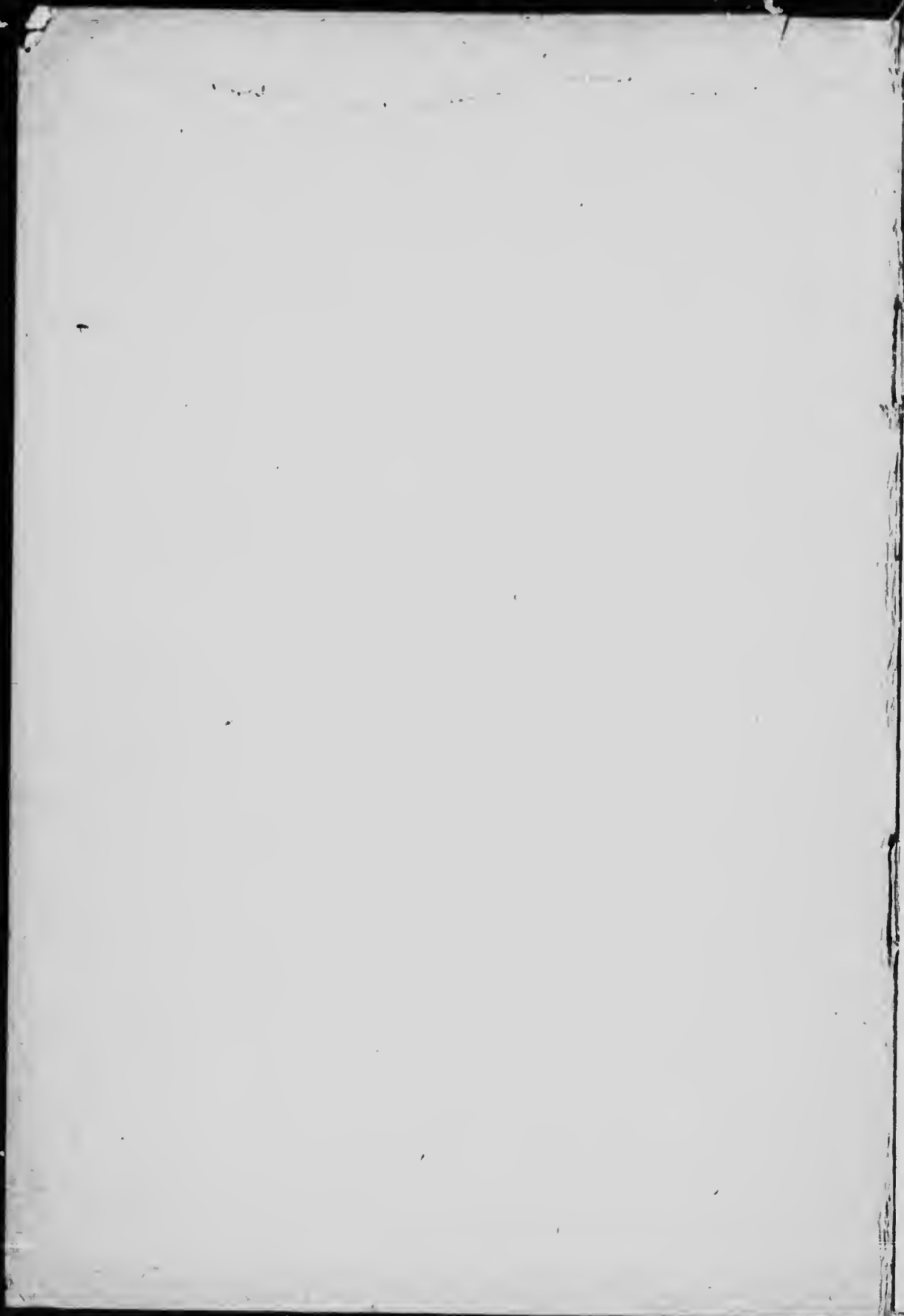
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THOSE YOUNG BARBARIANS.

By F. H. BOLTON.

Author of "A Deadly Anchorage," "Trapped," "The

CHAPTER I.

THOMPSON'S servant-girl stepped forth into the back garden, a basket of washing under her arm. Next moment the maid was in the garden, hanging out the clothes," and for several moments after. She came at length to the end of the grounds, and was about to peg up the last few articles.

For reasons best known, doubtless, to herself, she stepped aside from the beaten path on to the softer earth of the garden bed. Then she gave one of those horrible "squawks," such as only a servant-girl can give, and sank to her waist in the ground, which collapsed under her weight.

For a brief moment, as she afterwards explained to a sympathetic friend, she thought she was dead, but, finding eventually that she still lived, and that the earth had not opened to swallow her altogether, she took heart of grace. Glancing round she saw, what had not caught her eye before, a mound of soil, evidently the remains of a recent excavation.

"The little vagabone!" she hissed. "If I don't go straight in and tell 'is ma! He's done it for the purpose; don't tell me!"

With that directness which only the prospect of having some disagreeable tale to tell can inspire in the breast of the harmless, necessary maid-of-all-work, she repaired forthwith—the flustered and indignant emblem of injured innocence—to the house. By the time she had found Mrs. Thompson the remembrance of her woes had increased upon her.

"Master Jack's been at it again, mum!" she began, out of breath. "I do declare I never was so scared in all my life. I made sure I was done for

for good and all. You could 'a knocked me down with a feather, that you could, mum!"

Mrs. Thompson smiled. She was used to Jane's rhetoric.

"You certainly seem to have had a fall," she said, "whether you were knocked down by a feather or not. What is the matter?"

"It's that Master Jack, mum, and 'is chum, Jim Burton; two such young imps as I never see the like of in all my born days. It's a wonder to me as I'm alive to tell the tale; I'm sure I never thought to be, and wouldn't, neither, if they was to get their way. I'll be bound!"

Knowing it was hopeless to try to stop her, Mrs. Thompson allowed the excited domestic to talk herself out, as it were; and from the torrent of language gathered that her hopeful son and his bosom friend of next door had one had "been up to their tricks again." According to the outraged Jane they had dug a deep pit and covered the top over (in a manner quite past her powers of explanation) with the evident intention of getting her to break her precious neck.

"Which is the greatest mercy I didn't, mum! They young monkeys would 'a been only too glad to see me do it."

The views of Master Jack, however, on his return from school, were anything but corroborative of the worthy maid's statement. So far from expressing pleasure in the success of what she considered a trap for herself, he was loud in exclamations of wrath over the demolition of his earthworks.

"You great clumsy gawk, Jane!" he cried, with the irreverent frankness of the twelve-year-old lad; "what on earth made you go tramping with

your plumping feet all over my tunnel? I put up a notice to keep off, big enough for anybody but a blind owl to see. You only put your beastly old washing up to-day so as to get a chance to go clumping about where you'd no business."

"I've got my work to do, and it's for your ma to say whether I've to leave it or not," answered the indignant damsel; "and I wasn't born to be called a gawk, so I'd have you know *that*, Master Jack."

The boy turned wrathfully away, and promptly sought out his friend of next door but one, into whose sympathetic ears he poured his tale of woes.

"That ass of a girl's been and walked all over the top of our tunnel, Jim," he said.

An anxious look came into Jim's eyes.

"Crumbs!" he exclaimed. "Is it damaged?"

"Is it damaged?" was the retort. "What do you think—and that lump plumping on top of it. Why, man, it's fairly squashed in like piecrust!"

"She ought to be hung!" said his chum, and he found no difficulty in agreeing with this verdict.

The two lads, however, were not of the giving-up or "sha'n't play" type. Difficulties and sets back acted rather as spurs to their activity, as they are usually meant to do for all of us. The next favourable opportunity saw them together at the hoton of the long garden planning ways and means for a second, and more satisfactory excavation.

"It'll be just the stunningest cave you ever saw," said Jack, beaming in anticipation. "Won't it be larks when it's done?"

"Rather!" answered Jim. "Your father must be a good sort to let you scoop up the place like we're going to."

"He is; but to tell you the honest truth," was the startling reply. "I haven't thought to let him know about it yet. I'm going to surprise him, when it's done."

"Like you surprised that porpoise of a Jane?" suggested his friend.

If any boy thinks the two youngsters had set themselves an easy task in purposing to excavate a tunnel and a cave, he might try the plan for himself. The backs of the two lads ached considerably long before any appreciable impression had been made, but as Jack Thompson pluckily remarked, "Never say die till you're dead; and you can please yourself about it then."

Together they laboured during every available spare moment, with the result that in about a week they had scooped out a very respectable burrow, and a god sized cave at the end, the roof of which, by dint of much hard labour, they made fairly secure with the help of some short planks of wood which Jim had "borrowed" from his own father's territory, and smuggled into his friend's garden by the field which ran along the end of the terrace plots, and which was divided from the gardens themselves by a low hank and a hedge.

It so happened that, the site of their amateur engineering works being at the far end of the grounds, the excavation had not caught the eye of the elder Thompson up to now, his interest in the garden being mainly centred in the portion nearest the house; and the inquisitiveness of the "porpoise of a Jane" had been subdued by threats on the part of both lads that they would give her "what for" if she didn't keep off their enclosure.

It was a threat for which she had some respect, for she knew a little of Master Jack's ingenuity in the way of tormenting. The job was therefore finished without further mishap, and Jack's ingenuous intention of doing the deed first and asking for leave afterwards was only fulfilled in part. He certainly did the deed but he forgot altogether about asking for leave.

The consequence was, that Mr. Thompson, strolling leisurely down the garden with a pipe in his mouth one evening, and thinking of nothing in particular, unless it might be the unusual absence of boys from the place—for there were generally Jack and a friend or two about—was somewhat

started to observe in a sudden a dense volume of smoke rise from the earth near the hedge by the field.

He walked quickly down to the spot, wondering whether his senses had deceived him, or whether a new volcano was about to declare itself in his peaceful back garden. Volcanoes, certainly, had long been out of fashion in England, but perhaps they were coming in again—you never knew your luck!

All idea, however, of this nature had to give place to less romantic conjectures as he neared the column of smoke. Smothered voices, apparently underground, struck his astonished ears. Because he was a matter-of-fact Briton all question of gnomes or brownies was dismissed from his mind as preposterous, but it was some few moments before he reached the bottom of the truth in this strange matter. The large amount of recently thrown-up earth which lay around struck him as abnormal, nor could he at first quite make out whence the voices were proceeding. His interesting soliloquy, beginning with "Well, I'm bothered!" was, however, quickly cut short. The voices were becoming rather more distinct, and he had no difficulty in recognizing their owners. True, they sounded muffled, but they were unmistakable.

"You silly muff!" said one. "You'll choke us both!" Cough—cough—sneeze.

"Well, how should I know—" Sneeze—sneeze—cough.

"Put it out, you gaby! Do you want—" Cough—cough—gasp.

"Jack, it's getting into my eyes awfully. Oh!—" Sneeze—sneeze—cough.

The next moment a blinking face rose from the earth on the other side of a mound not far from the feet of the astounded Mr. Thompson, and a voice exclaimed:

"I say, Jack, here's your father!"

After which the face disappeared hurriedly, and for two or three seconds there was silence. The smoke, however, which hitherto had issued from a small hole further away from the mound, and evidently intended for a chimney, now began to make its way

through the larger opening where the head had last been seen, and in another instant, with much coughing and spluttering, the two half-choked youngsters struggled into the daylight.

When they had rubbed the smoke from their weeping eyes and coughed out the last wreaths of it from their lungs, one youth stood a little awkwardly in suspense, but the other collected his wits and said faintly:

"Hello, dad! It's a cave, only we couldn't get the fire to act right!"

"So it seems," said Mr. Thompson, grimly, "and who, may I ask gave you permission to dig up my garden and set it on fire?"

"We thought we'd do it as a kind of surprise packet," said his elder son. "I knew jolly well you wouldn't mind having something different from the rest of folks in your garden. Come and have a look, the fire's going out soon, I expect, and if you crawl on your stomach for a little way, there'll be room for you in the cave."

A flame of memory flickered up in Mr. Thompson's brain. Time was when it had been far pleasanter to sit cooped up under a tent of one's own erection in the back yard than to have the run of the whole house unhindered; when thick bread and butter, and tea made from smoky water over a fire of brushwood and moss, had been sweeter far than any dinner, cooked ever so well and served in style at home. He thought, with a little sigh, how great a part imagination had played in his boyhood's years, and how small its sphere for him in these latter days. And the little flame of bygone memories softened any feeling of irritation he might otherwise have felt at the youngsters' liberties with his garden.

"Humph!" he growled, and tried, unsuccessfully, to put his smile behind him. "Mind you don't do any more damage, that's all. How have you managed to keep the ground from tumbling in and burying you?"

"Oh! we've worked it all right, Mr. Thompson," put in Jim eagerly; "we've got some short wood planks and laid them across the roof like a shelf."

"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. Thomson, 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 Burtens—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.

They all talked at once, and yet, in spite of the tumult, they seemed to be arriving at some understanding. Now they would take strides towards the mouth of the burrow, now they would seem to be measuring the distance between that and the opening into the field. On a sudden the third lad drew their attention to the pole near the cave, which was used to support the clothes-line that had been the indirect cause of Jane's earlier downfall amid the earthworks. He moistened his hands, and before the old lady at the window could make out what he intended, he had swarmed to the top of the post.

"Ha, ha!" he cried, and this time the words were audible to her: "just the very thing. A line from here across the next garden to the post in yours, Burton, would do the trick fine!"

He held on by his legs and one hand, and with the other hand pointed across like the pioneer of a new land pointing out its possibilities.

"I daresay it would," shouted Jack, "but what about old Grumpimug?"

"Grumpimug? Who's he?"

"He's the old bird that lives next door—with a face like a sour lemon, and—oh, scissors!"

The two other lads followed the direction of his eyes, and turned, to see the old lady standing close to the open window and gazing down upon them fixedly.

"Grumpimug's old pet," whispered the irreverent Jack. "Hope she didn't hear."

He rapidly made himself scarce, bolting into the field close followed by the others.

The old lady turned away. There was strange excitement in her manner. She trembled pitifully as she walked from the window to an easy chair at the back of the room. Had the lads seen her then, their rude merriment had surely died down. Her grey head was bent, and her sad face was covered by her hands.

"It might have been *he* himself; so very, very like. How long, O Lord, how long?"

So, for considerable time, she sat, crying a little, and talking in a low, piteous tone. Yet there was none other in the room to hear; only herself—and God.

CHAPTER II.

Josiah Grayling, Esq., was at tea with his wife in the room overlooking the terrace gardens. The servant had a moment before entered with a note for him, and you had only to watch the scowl upon his face as he read the contents in evident astonishment, to see the aptness of the name, "Grumpimug," so irreverently bestowed upon him by Master Jack Thompson.

"Bother those lads!" he growled. "There's no bottoming their impudence."

Mrs. Grayling looked at him questioningly. She was always a little in awe of her husband's overhearing disposition, but the last day or two she had seemed more reticent than ever in his presence.

"That boy next door, and the other young scamp—what do you think they're after now? Want to pass a string across the poles from one garden to the other over my ground! Over *my* ground, if you please! Did you ever hear of such a thing? At least, I suppose that's what they're driving at by all this jargon."

"A string?" queried his wife, in some surprise. "Whatever for?"

"How should I know? Oh, to—here, see for yourself; if you can make out their wretched scrawl."

He tossed the letter unceremoniously enough to his gentle wife, and went on with his meal. She took it up eagerly, and read it:

"Sir,—The undersined present their compliments to Mr. Grayling, and beg you will allow them the privilege mentioned below, viz., to let us pass a cord over his garden from the garden of one of the aforementioned undersineds to the garden of the other aforementioned undersineds. We greatly desire you will permit the writers this privilege, as the cord sha'n't be in your way. The writers hereby agree to pass it over high enough so that Mr. Grayling can walk under it without knocking his hat off.

"And what we want it for is so that we can make signals to each of the undersineds when the other wants to call his attention.

"And your petitioners will ever pray,

"(Sined) John Thompson.

"(Sined) James Burton.

"To Mr. Grayling, Esq.

"P.S.—An answer will oblige.

"(Sined) John Thompson.

"(Sined) James Burton."

Mrs. Grayling read this letter through two or three times. Then she looked at her husband.

"Well?" he asked.

"They won't do any harm, Josiah."

"Won't do any harm? Do you suppose I want a whole army of boys tramping backwards and forwards over my garden? They're nuisance enough now, with their shouting and racket. Give them an inch and they'll take an ell. There's a bit of the wild beast in every boy."

Mrs. Grayling sighed. Then she took her courage in both hands and spoke her thoughts.

"I can't agree with you altogether, dear," she said. "I know boys *are* a bit wild at times, but it's their nature, bless the lads, and I don't believe they need be any worse for it. Wildness of this kind may only mean strong, bright spirits, and the promise of good, brave men some day. I've watched those two from my window. They've cheered me up, although they never even knew or cared that I was noticing them. It was a pleasure to see how they worked at their play, digging and boring, and trundling the earth like men. I didn't mind their whooping and whistling, not I. I felt the better for it—less of a moping, useless old woman than I've done for a long time. No dear, I *can't* agree with you on this. I say with all my heart, God bless those boys!"

Her husband stared. This was certainly a new experience to him, to have his quiet, unobtrusive wife oppose him in such long-winded speech. But the novelty acted something as a dash of cold water in the face—it made him gasp, metaphorically speaking, for maybe a moment, but it brought a glow afterwards that was as refreshing as it was surprising.

To Mrs. Grayling's astonishment he did not snap her up in his usual autocratic style, and his unexpected silence gave her fresh courage.

"Besides," she continued, flushing with the unwonted flow of her words, "these lads have brains; you can see they're not of the silly automatic type that only plays in beaten tracks. They've worked out their plans and stuck to them, and they're evidently working out others, to judge by this funny boyish letter. You oughtn't to be down on them—you *used* to say a boy that used his brains was one of God's most promising creatures."

Mr. Grayling scowled. His wife was evidently hitting him hard.

"Is that any reason for letting them annoy *me*?" he asked gloomily.

"They won't; I'm quite sure they won't. You should have seen them the other day planning this communication between their two gardens. There was a third boy with them, Josiah. My heart stood still for a moment when I saw him—he was so like—so very like—"

She paused. The look on her husband's face was forbidding. Fearing to undo the slight good she might already have done, she passed on, without finishing what she was saying.

"Yes, they've certainly got brains. They've put up a sort of signal arrangement at the top of a clothes post in each garden with strings and arms, and they signal to each other. It's quite a sight to see the arms moving. They only finished it yesterday."

Mr. Grayling's pride, or surliness, or what you will, was hard to break down. Spite of the momentary interest he had taken in his wife's account, the habit of having his own way could not be broken in a moment.

"Oh, well!" he said, "if they've got a semaphore, what on earth do they want with a cord across my garden as well? It's just what I always said, give a boy an inch and he'll take an ell."

He crumpled the letter up and tossed it aside; and there for the time the matter had perforce to rest.

Then came the stirring hattle of the cave.

It was Saturday afternoon, and Mrs. Grayling sat at her window looking out over the gardens, as she had done so often of late. Even if no boys were about the long gardens with their dividing hedges and the large field made a pleasant outlook. But if the boys appeared upon the scene she forgot all else.

To-day, as she sat and watched, the door of the Thompson's kitchen suddenly flew open, and Jack, cap all anyhow on head, shot out, and bolted down towards his earthworks. He stood under the pole at the top of which was his amateur semaphore, and the next moment the arms of the signal were flying up and down as if possessed. From her window the lonely watcher could see a similar semaphore in the Burtons' garden, but its arms hung limply, and the absence of any response to his signal evidently made the boy impatient. He raised his voice in an unmelodious shout, which penetrated into more back yards than those of the Graylings and the Burtons.

"Jim, you silly gudgeon, what's the good of my signalling my arms nearly off if you can't answer?"

This was followed by another flurry of the semaphore, and shortly after an answering hail from next door but one set his heart at ease. There was a momentary exchange of signals—for no very apparent reason except the fun of it—and then the semaphore arms hung limp again. Jack turned and busied himself at the entrance to the burrow, and a moment afterwards Jim Burton crawled through the hole in the hedge, followed by another lad. Mrs. Grayling started, and her eyes lit up. It was the boy the sight of whom had so strangely moved her a few days ago.

Evidently great things were on. The three boys consulted together for a short time; then Jack wriggled out of sight into the cave. He emerged with a fencing-stick and a coil of rope, which later he flung at the foot of the semaphore post. The two other lads then sallied forth into the field, and Jack was left alone, to act apparently as sentry. To the old lady watching from her quiet room the whole procedure afforded a pleasure out of all

proportion. Surely there was something more than just a trio of three playful lads; she surely saw things other than the scene before her? Else why that suspicion of a tear amongst the smiles that lighted up her face every now and again?

For some little time the solitary sentinel paced to and fro in front of his mounds, then, impatient of the monotony, he forgot his military bearing. Dropping the stick he had shouldered, he prepared to warm up the post to take a higher and broader view of things. Just, however, as he had clasped the pole a long dart, made from a light stick tipped with a paper wing, flew over the hedge and buried itself in the soft earth near him, to the consternation of the lady at the window, who wondered what would happen next. In an instant the valiant sentinel had seized his weapon again and made a dash for the hole in the hedge. The fray had evidently begun in real earnest.

For a considerable time he held the passage against "unnumbered odds"—unnumbered, that is, by the lady watching, who was unable to see clearly what had happened. In reality there were three youths on the further side who were endeavoring to force their way into the garden. Amid shouts and laughter, and occasional howls when now and again a stroke or a thrust told with exceptional effect, the mimic battle raged. At length an angry shout went up from the throat of Master Jack, who was evidently tiring of the uneven condition of affairs.

"Here, Jim and Art, you silly cuckoos, hurry up, wherever you are!"

From which Mrs. Grayling guessed that the foe was other than the lads she had seen earlier on. Indeed, this was soon apparent, for now into her range of vision came these boys themselves round from the front of the house, silently and swiftly tip-toeing down the garden path, and dodging here and there behind fruit bush or tree, when there seemed any danger of discovery.

She wondered, with an excitement to which she had long been a stranger whether after all they were friends or

foes. Almost, in her anxiety, she was calling out to the valiant Jack, lest they came to overflow and not to aid; but with a smile at her own wild tumult of heart she restrained the impulse of the moment.

Nearer and nearer the young scamps came, and just before reaching the scene of action they threw themselves upon the ground, and wormed their way upon their stomachs towards the hedge. Whereupon followed a piece of strategy that would have done credit to older heads. The foremost boy had drawn Jack's attention to their presence, and he, making a momentary feint of giving away, stepped back for a second. In an instant one of the attacking party was through the hole in the hedge; but, before his friends could follow, Jack was back on the defensive, and his two allies had pounced upon the intruder.

A short, sharp scuffle ensued. The boys in the field, realizing what had happened, redoubled their shouts and their efforts to break through, what time Jim and the boy they had called Art dragged their struggling prisoner, after much hard work to the post in the rear, where they endeavored to truss him with the rope and render his opposition of less avail.

It was at this crisis that disaster fell upon the doughty Jack. One of the two remaining lads of the attacking party fell suddenly forward through the opening, manfully disregarding the blows he could not dodge, and, catching the defender by the ankle, pulled him to the ground, causing him to lose his grasp of the basket stick in the shock. A mighty shout of triumph went up, and before his friends dared leave their prisoner Jack was hauled upon his back into the field, and dragged over the grass by the legs, with much loss of dignity and comfort.

However much they might desire to aid their fallen comrade, now leaving the arena of battle in such uncomely style, neither Jim nor the youngster called "Art" could leave the prisoner they had themselves taken. He it was who decided that upon the instant, for though his body was roped

to the pole his hands had not yet been pinioned, and he made a firm grab at the collar of each of his captors, the while he jeered rudely at their efforts to get away to their comrade's aid.

"Go on, he yelled gleefully. "Go on! Don't mind *me*. I can wait. If you don't jolly well look sharp there won't be much of him left to get back. Hurrah, our side!"

Much of the meaning of all this shouting and rough-and-tumble was lost upon Mrs. Grayling at her window. Now she leaned to the idea that it was all part of a huge game, such a game as wild, healthy lads would delight in, where the chance of a cracked head or a bruised shin would only add an interest to the play; now again she was filled with misgiving that it was all dead earnest, and that her own particular friends were in danger of untold sufferings should they be vanquished in the conflict.

At the end of the Burton garden was a small shed for stowage of garden tools, and into this she presently espied Master Jack, right side uppermost by now, being hustled. It took them some little time, even with the persuasive force of two to one, to get him satisfactorily pushed inside; but at length they succeeded in shutting the door upon him and locking it. Whereupon, taking the key, they vanished, and Jack was left to kick to his heart's content; nor, to judge by the noise and thumping, was that content going to be soon arrived at.

The other prisoner was by now overcome and rendered helpless, and the rival armies being thus equalized met in the open, each on its way to attempt the rescue of the imprisoned third portion it had lost. For some few minutes four boys were so mixed up that their own mothers would have had difficulty in sorting them, and it was only possible to tell whose legs were struck by the basket stick with which Burton had armed himself, by the howl from the head of corresponding ownership.

After a time, however, the two hosts separated, and the captors of Master Jack Thompson, feigning flight, were hotly pursued. Taking a long circle in the field they gained on their pur-

sners, and at length made a dash for the garden where their comrade was tied, like a trussed cockerel, to the clothes post. There was no time to release him, however; albeit one of them made a gallant attempt with a blunt penknife, sawing feverishly but ineffectively at his thongs. The pursuers were now hard upon them, and, leaving the task unfinished, he followed the first lad into the cave, whence, masters for the time being of the situation, they hurled derisive epithets at the former owners.

Jim Burton stared disconsolate.

"What makes you were," he cried, "to let them get down there; it'll take a month to get them out."

But the other lad turned to him with dancing eyes.

"Don't you worry, my son," he said, executing a dance in the exuberance of his spirits. "Just you leave it to me. I reckon *we're* going to pull it off this time."

The idea was scouted by a fresh burst of derision from the two inside the burrow, in which the trussed prisoner joined without invitation.

Nowise put out, the lad whispered to his comrade and disappeared, leaving him on guard at the cave mouth. He soon reappeared in the further garden, where he applied himself to the task of freeing Jack, whose kicks were still fast and furious upon the inside of the shed. Using a plank which he found at hand, and utterly regardless of the feelings with which the elder Burton might be supposed to look upon the outrage to his property, he made a running charge at the shed door. The crash was delightful and quite effectual. The door flew open, and Jack emerged triumphant. The two looked at the result of the collision.

"Old Jim'll have a job to put up *that* right, so's his pater won't notice it!" said Jack complacently.

The final move, which gave the game back into the hands of the original holders of the cave, was totally unexpected by the old lady, who sat watching the sentinel left on guard and wondering what had become of the two she had seen a few moments before contemplating the damage to Mr. Burton's tool shed.

Suddenly she heard the door of the Thompson's kitchen open, and before her astonished eyes appeared Jack and his friend, bearing between them a large pail of water. She saw the boy closer now than she had seen him hitherto, and her heart beat with renewed excitement.

"It *must* be!" she murmured. "It is his very image!"

An exclamation behind her caused her to start and tremble violently. Turning, she beheld her husband standing and looking over her shoulder at the two lads.

"Oh, my dear," she whispered, "what will the end be?"

He paid no heed; all his attention was concentrated on the laughing pair, struggling under their load down the garden path. A sudden shout from the pinioned boy, "Look out, you fellows! They're going to dr——" was stopped by Burton, who unceremoniously covered the youngster's mouth with his hand, and caused the remainder of the friendly warning to die off in a spluttering guggle. The next instant, to an accompanying howl of triumph, the contents of the pail were shot down the hole which had been made as chimney to the cave. There was a scuffle and a yell.

"Oh, I say, *that's* too bad! I've got the jolly lot down the back of my neck!"

Fearful of what further treats might follow, the two denizens of the cave struggled each to be first out, with the result that a portion of the earthworks were demolished in their struggles, as they emerged, draggled and unkempt, into the daylight, to face the delighted laughter of their opponents.

The game was over. Amid a final series of ear-splitting yells, they were overpowered, and the victory lay with the first holders of the earthworks, who stood now amongst the ruins, contemplating half-doubtfully what the price paid for triumph was not, after all, rather high.

Mrs. Grayling turned to her husband. She spoke no word, yet he answered the question in her mind.

"Oh! if you like," he said, half-grudgingly, and she rang the bell.

CHAPTER III.

Peace having been declared after the Battle of the Cave, the opposing forces had foregathered in friendly confabulation. It was during this that "Art" made his off-hand confession to Jim Burton.

"I say, my son," he remarked, casually, "I had to knock that old twopenny-half-penny shed about a bit in your garden, but I daresay you'll be able to fake it up in two ticks."

Visions of possible future difficulties on the subject with the elder Burton caused Jim to prick up his ears. From the easy reference to "knocking the twopenny-half-penny old shed about a bit," and the flippant estimate of "two ticks" as the time limit for repairs, he gathered that at any rate it might be advisable to make a speedy survey of damages, and accordingly he headed a procession for the next garden but one. Jack had stayed behind for a moment, taking stock of the partial ruins of his own cherished cove, and was consequently alone when the servant from next door looked through the dividing hedge.

"Mrs. Grayling wants to see you and the others," she said.

Jack looked up.

"What?" he exclaimed, for the invitation was new of its kind. "all the whole boiling of us?"

The girl had her doubts. She was evidently not quite clear as to the "whole boiling" being in request.

"I don't think missus could a-meant *all*," she said, thoughtfully.

"I say," said Jack, with a confidential lowering of voice, "is the old boy there too?"

"Mr. Grayling, d'you mean? Yes, master's in."

"Ah!" was the reply. "I expect it's an answer to the petition. *I'll* come, and, if there's any more wanted, I can haul them along afterwards."

So saying, he went to the top of the garden, where he took upon himself to climb over the dividing wall between the two yards in preference to going round by the front door.

"Don't forget," said the girl sharply, "to wipe your boots."

Jack took the hint—a by no means unnecessary one—and then, removing his cap and patting down his hair as best he could with a hand not fastidiously clean, he was shown into the upper room where Mrs. Grayling sat.

Her husband was by the window looking out. He nodded shortly to the boy, but did not speak. It was from the grey-haired, kindly lady who sat in the easy chair facing him as he entered that the first words came.

"Master John Thompson, I suppose?" she said with a smile. Then added, with a look of expectancy,

"But where are your friends?"

"Oh! they're knocking about in Jim's garden, Mrs. Grayling. I didn't know whether you wanted them *all* to come in; they'll make such a mess."

He glanced nervously at his own boots as he said this.

Mr. Grayling turned.

"Well, if you're '(Signed) John Thompson,' where's '(Signed) James Burton'?"

"I'll fetch him in half a sec," said Jack eagerly.

He thought he could see light now, but he knew he wanted his friend badly, to help him wear off this unwanted awkwardness.

"Yes," said Mrs. Grayling, with tremulous eagerness, "but there's another boy. He was playing with you to-day. We were watching you and him carry that bucket of water"—she smiled, and Jack began to feel more at home—"I should like to see him also. What is his name?"

Jack little knew the pent-up anxiety underlying those few words.

"Oh, I know who you mean," he said gaily: "that's Artfex."

The lady's face fell. Even Jack saw something of the pitiful disappointment in it.

"Arty Feeks!" she said blankly.

"Arty Feeks!" growled the old gentleman, whipped for the moment into taking an interest in the conversation: "that's a strange name, isn't it?"

"Oh! It isn't his *real* name," answered Jack glibly. "He's a friend of Jim's. He's only just come here, I believe, and he doesn't go to the grammar school yet, so I don't know

his proper name. We always call him Artifex because he's so natty at making things, and he puts us up to all sorts of dodges. You know"—turning to the puzzled Mr. Grayling—"common are to either sex, Artitex and Opifex." Well, that's the Artitex."

Strange how slight a thing lifts the sluice-gates of memory, and floods us with a recollection of things long past. Strange, too, the softening influence of this wondrous flood. Nothing that Jack could have said, nothing that Mrs. Grayling could have pleaded, would so have moved the gruff old gentleman as this innocent repetition of one of the old familiar catch rhymes from the Latin "Subsidia." The intervening years were for the moment blotted out, and he saw himself a light-hearted youngster at school, learning, or pretending to learn, and over and over in his mind rolled this and other long-forgotten phrases of the class. He lost sight for a time of his frosty grumpiness, and he and the boy in front of him drew suddenly close, the years between them gone. He actually laughed, and there was a twinkle in his eye to which he long had been a stranger. Mrs. Grayling had kept silence from very surprise at the change.

"Ha! ha! he exclaimed. "So he's Artifex, the artificer, is he? Well, fetch him in, and let's have a look at him."

As soon as the boy was gone Mrs. Grayling looked at her husband. He did not speak, but somehow she felt, as we *do* feel these things at times, without words, that he was in softer mood.

"Suppose it should be?" she said timidly.

"Well," he grunted, "suppose it should be, what then?"

"And when he was yet a great way off," she replied gently, "his father—his father, Josiah—ran, and fell on his neck and kissed him."

There was no answer. Strange thoughts were flying through the old man's brain. Memories of the old schooldays, long since past, but brought back now in the curiously softened, half sad, half pleasant way

in which memory recalls the past. Other recollections, too, of his school days, not his own, indeed, but of one in whom he had taken the keenest pride, he remembered now with a sharp pang. These and other thoughts beat up against a wall of stubbornness and hard-feeling that had been built long ago and had stood for many years. They were rising higher and higher against it, and bid fair soon to break it down.

But as yet it stood, and so there was no answer.

In another few minutes there were sounds of steps upon the stairs, and with a knock at the door the three lads entered. Before anything could be said the old lady had risen and held out her hand to the youngster named "Art." A frank, blue-eyed lad he was, of open and intelligent countenance, who looked up in surprise as she spoke.

"Surely I cannot be mistaken in that face! Your name *must* be Grayling?"

The answer came unexpectedly from Jim Burton, whose astonishment was no whit less than that of the other.

"Why," he cried, "of course it is. Art, old man, what a mooney I was never to give it a thought. It's the same name as o——"

He stopped. He *had* been going to say, "Old Grumpinug," and the words all but escaped him. A tell-tale flush mounted to his face, but the others were too much occupied to notice it.

The situation was straightened out by Mr. Grayling himself. Assuming suddenly a heartiness and fluency which surprised his wife, and brought back to her mind visions of earlier days, he came quickly across the room towards the boys.

"Suppose you two young gentlemen come with me," he said, taking Jack and Jim by the arms. "We'll go into the garden and see what it is that my petitioners will 'ever pray,' shall we?"

And he led them gently out, closing the door upon "Artifex" and his wife.

"Now," said he, when they were at the end of the garden, the boys walking by his side in silent wonder at events which were taking them out of their usual depths, "what is it you want?"

Jack looked at Jim, and Jim looked at Jack.

"You tell," said Jim to his friend, and after a moment's pause the boy's tongue became unloosed.

"It was Art's idea, sir. You see we had a cave in our garden, and I wanted to be able to call up Jim whenever I liked, without the jolly fag of going and ringing at his front door; besides, it's like a sort of telegraphing. We've learnt a few signs from the articles about signalling in the 'B.O.P.' and we've invented some," he added with a laugh, remembering how feverishly the semaphore arms had flung themselves about that afternoon.

"Humph! Yes; but you haven't put the thing very clearly. I'm afraid. What was Art's idea, and where am I wanted to come in?"

"Oh! we only wanted you to let us carry a cord over the top of your pole. The notion was to fix a sort of bell-pull from the cave up to Jim's bedroom window——"

"But surely," interrupted the old man, laughing in spite of himself, "you wouldn't want to go ringing your friend up at night time?"

"I might in the morning, though," answered Jack quickly. "He's a lazy beggar is Jim, and his father ought to be jolly glad if I get him out of bed; he can't."

"You shut up!" put in the aggrieved Jim. "I can be up as early as you any day!"

Without committing himself as a supporter of either opinion on this momentous subject Mr. Grayling gave his consent to the right of way, and, shaking hands with both lads, helped them over into the Burton's garden. They were standing alone (for long ere this the other three lads had left) before they quite realized that their companion "Art" was left behind, and they had been politely returned, as it were, to their own grounds.

"Rum go, this!" said Jim. "I bet that beggar's getting fed up with tea and cakes. I never gave it a thought about his having the same name as Grumpinug. Shouldn't wonder if the old lady turns out to be a fairy god-mother, or something."

"Perhaps he's her long-lost son," said Jack thoughtlessly.

"Likely, isn't it?" was the reply. "Why, she's old enough to be his great-grandmother twice over. I expect his pater's aunt was a sort of second cousin of Grumpinug's wife's mother! You hear of those sort of things sometimes?"

"Do you?" said Jack indifferently, though he rather wondered where. The subject, however, was quickly changed. They had arrived at the shed, and Jim's thoughts were brought back to it.

"You were a silly muff to knock the door about like this," he said in injured tone. "It'll take me all my time to make the pater see it wasn't my fault."

"It wasn't mine either, if you come to that," said Jack. "I was inside, and first thing I knew was no end of a thump, and bang comes the beastly thing smack against my head. A couple of nails and a hammer 'll shake it together again."

"We can try," said Jim doubtfully; "but you wouldn't be so chippy about it if it was *your* pater's place, I know."

As to which Jack wisely refrained from argument.

In the meanwhile Mr. Grayling had retraced his steps back to his wife and the young stranger. The waters were lapping up to the top of the wall now; a little more, and they would overflow it, stubborn and stiff though it had stood so many years.

He entered the room and stood for a moment silent. The old lady's arms were round the boy's neck, as he knelt at her chair; her grey head was bent over his golden pate.

"Many a time has your dear father knelt at my chair like this," she was saying, "and many have been the long talks he and I have had together."

"Can you not learn to love me a little also, my dear child? I have been very lonely."

The waters surged over the edge of that frowning wall; in one irresistible mass they poured themselves against it—and it fell. The old man realized, with a fierce stab through the heart, something of what his wife had suffered during the many empty years that had passed. He strode across the room and gently touched the grey head. There was a catch in his voice as he spoke.

"Forgive me, dear; I have been blind for a long time, but I think my eyes are being opened at last."

He bent over his wife and gently stroked the grey hairs.

"And now, he continued, "I am going out with this young gentleman, if he will take me to his home. I suppose we shall find your father there—eh, my lad?"

He asked the question in some sudden wild fear of doubt. Up to now there had been nothing said to him as to whether the father were even alive. But the boy's reply reassured him.

"Oh, yes, sir, father's at home. He will be surprised at my bringing you, though."

He nodded his head in somewhat shamed silence. The old lady drew the boy's face down to her own and kissed him.

"Go with your grandfather, my dear," she said, and bring my dear son back to me."

When the two were gone she sat dreaming of the past, softened now and less painful to recall, in view of the brighter hopes for the future. It had been the old, old story, which we hear so often and from which we so rarely learn the lesson, of the conflict of loving but stubborn natures, and unyielding pride. They had plumed so much for, and set such hopes upon, their only child, and he had failed to answer to his father's plans. The old man had set his heart, perhaps somewhat unreasonably, upon one career; the young man upon another, and so—

Ah, me! It sometimes seems as though the bitterest quarrels are between those who have loved each other most; as though pride took cruel pleasure in blocking up the walls of love. The mother's tears had flowed for her son when in hot unreasoning anger he had left his home, but the father's heart had grown hard within him.

"Never let me hear him spoken of again!" had been his cruel command.

Twice had letters reached them from the lad. One had been burnt without perusal, in spite of the mother's entreaties, the other had been returned to the address shown on opening it without word or comment. And this harsh action had widened a breach which had not been bridged through all the silent years. Not until those light-hearted "young wretches" next door had unconsciously broken into the embattered and saddened lives with their wild bouts of happy laughter and play.

She did not know it; perhaps he himself had hardly realized the change that had been taking place, till that very afternoon, when the pent-up torrents of memory poured down upon him and brought upon their bosom a dark weight of shame. It was a new feeling for old Mr. Grayling to stand as he had done that day before a boy and realize in his conscience that his own early boyhood was better than his later years. Warily indeed must we all tread it we would so live that our pure boyhood shall not put our manhood's years to the blush.

But these thoughts were unknown to the gentle lady, who sat and dreamed and, waking at last to thank God for the new-found gladness, heard voices upon the stairs.

The door was thrown open. She rose with a glad cry to welcome the incomer.

"My boy at last! Thank God! My boy! My boy!"

Jack Thompson and his inseparable chum Jim were repairing the ravages which the battle had made upon their earthworks a few days later.

Down the garden path came the servant girl called Jane, whose erring feet had broken through their first tunnel. In her hands was a mysterious parcel, large, and neatly tied, and addressed to Masters John Thompson and James Burton. She handed it to the boys and stood looking on with feminine curiosity to know its contents, and not even Jack's suggestion that it might be a dynamite machine could induce her to go away.

Jim whipped out his knife and cut the cord, tearing the paper off and revealing a large box. Two heads bumped together in the feverish anxiety to examine the contents.

"My stars!" exclaimed Jack, when he had grasped the inward gloriousness of it all. "What a nobby rig out. It's a telephone, and wire, and cells, and all the jolly shoot. It can't be for us!"

"Can't it?" was the reply. "I don't see why it shouldn't, anyhow. Hello! Here's a note!"

He tore it open and read it. Then he laughed a little awkwardly.

"It's all right," he explained. "We're to rig it up between your show and mine and let him know how it works. But I say, Jack, somebody's been telling tales out of school. I'll warrant it's that beggar Art."

"What d'you mean?" asked Jack. "Who's it from, and what's the blabbing been about?"

He snatched at the note, with no excessive formality of courtesy.

"Crumbs!" he exclaimed. "He's a brick; but, oh! I say, I wonder how he knew we called him *that*."

For the note ended:—

"From your Old Friend,

"GRUMPING."

[THE END.]



