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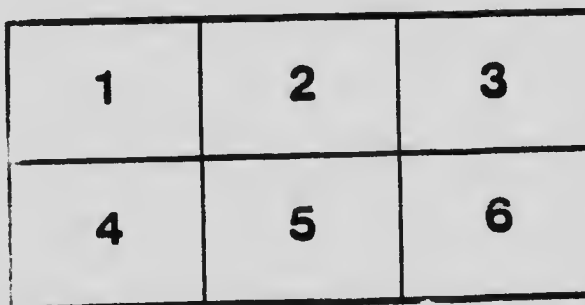
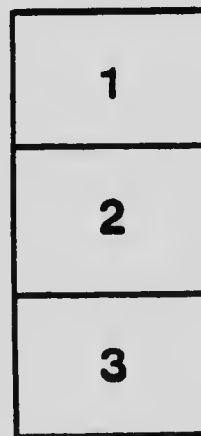
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The Doctor's Seagulls.

By REV. A. N. MALAN, D. D.

Author of "Stories of Holy Land," "Queer Old Questions," "The World's History," etc.

CHAPTER I.

"John, can you attend a moment?"

"Certainly, Rachel."

Dr. Porchester was resting in his arm-chair, engrossed with a book, the labors of the day being over. His sister was scanning *The Times*.

"There have been so many letters lately about the distress in Connemara, owing to the failure of the potato-crop."

"Yes, my dear, it is very sad. I sent them a donation last week—I wish we could do more. The Mansion House has opened a fund, which is receiving a generous response; so we may be sure all will be done that is possible to alleviate the distress."

"There have been various suggestions for raising money—concerts, bazaars, sales of work. Here is a novel advertisement:

"Young Sea-gulls for Sale. I have often thought how nice it would be to have a little flock of sea-gulls on the pond. I think I shall write for some."

"Very well, my dear. But hardly a flock! What would they find to eat?"

"Oh, I don't know—slugs and snails and worms and frogs. I suppose—anything they can pick up."

"H'm—rather a precarious diet! Sea-gulls are voracious feeders. But they would be an ornament to the pond and an object of interest to the boys. It must be clear understood that I must be exempt from all responsibility of attendance on them. If you like to try the experiment you must undertake their management. You will certainly have to feed them—we cannot have fish from Grimsby, but possibly they might be content with meat."

Miss Porchester readily consented to these terms, and by the next post she wrote for a consignment of four birds. They were to be called "The Doctor's Sea-gulls," but she would do everything for their comfort.

In due time the birds arrived by the carrier, with a notice in the invoice that their wings had been clipped.

The Doctor and his sister went down to the pond to set free the captives. Miss Porchester's imagination had drawn vivid pictures of that moment. She had fancied the happy birds, exulting in their release from confinement, taking to the water with eager delight, signifying their joy by cheerful cries. Swimming and diving, spraying themselves, preening their feathers, digging in the mud, and

gobbling up slugs and snails with avidity. But her fond imaginations were scarcely realized.

The birds did not seem to appreciate their good fortune. They made no effort to imitate the swans in Virgil, departing themselves gaily in the water, looking about with quick intelligence to explore their new domains. There was nothing like that. They swam demurely across to the island, waded out and ranged themselves in line, head to tail, each standing on one leg, with head thrown back, in an attitude of supreme indifference to the outside world.

"Poor little chicks!" said Miss Porchester, "they are bewildered by the long journey. They will soon be rested, and feel at home. Let us leave them to settle down, John."

Later in the day Dr. Porchester went down to the pond. The sea-gulls were in the same attitude on the same spot, looking as though they had not moved a muscle since last seen. The Doctor pondered a moment, and then picked up a large stone, which he pitched into the pond, so as to send a splash upon the birds. They woke up, and flapped and waddled round the shore to the rear of the island. When Dr. Porchester walked round to get another sight, he saw them in line again, on one leg, head to tail.

"Decidedly dull birds," said the Doctor to himself, as he returned to the house.

As days passed on, Miss Porchester tried to cultivate friendship with the gulls. She took them daily portions of raw meat, and tried to lure them to come and feed. But they turned up their noses with contempt that was humiliating to their patroness. She had to leave the meat on the shore, and she hoped they would find it. As it always disappeared, she concluded they ate it when her back was turned. The dachshund puppy, Juno, could have enlightened her on the subject.

Miss Porchester was disappointed, and her brother pronounced the experiment a failure.

"They are not responsive birds, Rachel. They do not readily adapt themselves to altered circumstances. I am afraid the diet does not suit their constitution."

Matters did not much improve as November waned. When the pond froze later on, the gulls looked more disconsolate than ever. And when we invaded their domains for skating they resented the invasion with indignant squeaks. We pitied the poor things. To see them hop-

and-go-one with ineffectual attempts to fly was a piteous sight. The Doctor did not like it. "Ah! that ruthless cutting of the wings! Poor crippled things!"

Driven from the water they wandered about the frozen field, never troubling their heads to look for worms or other non-existent means of subsistence. Miss Porchester doubled her doles of meat, much to the satisfaction of Juno, who prowled about and laughed and grew fat, while the pitiable gulls starved. It was a lugubrious business.

However, that was the lowest ebb of their fortunes, and at last matters slowly began to improve. Under stress of circumstances the gulls began to show some shadow of a sporting spirit. They ventured into the kitchen-garden, and pecked about among the winter cabbage, possibly finding some dormant dainty here and there in the shape of food. John Carey, the gardener, liked to see them pay him a visit.

Harry Dawson, with all his love of the sea, which dated back to that summer time at Eastbourne, when his sandcastle caused such grievous misadventure to Dr. Porchester in the bathing-machine—Harry Dawson took a lively interest in the gulls. He would wheedle tit-bits from the cook, and coax the coy birds to come and feast.

He certainly had better luck than Miss Porchester. Their chilly contempt seemed to thaw under the warmth of his blandishments. He would keep up a sort of purring chuckle, and hold out portions of meat in a tempting manner, throwing them down and retreating gradually. And the gulls would swim across from the island sending broad ripples in their wake, and Harry always had the satisfaction of seeing them gulp down the food. He would tell Miss Porchester of his success, and she encouraged him in the task; so that he was regarded by us as the authorised keeper of the birds. Woe betide Juno, if Harry caught sight of her on the prowl when he was on a feeding errand!

Time passed on, and April, with sunshine and showers, smiled upon the scene. Warbling birds sang the sweet glee:

Spring delights are all returning,
Verdant leaflets clothe each spray;

and every heart was gladdened with thoughts of vernal rapture. We had noticed of late that one of the gulls was always trying to fly. It would take three or four hopping skips at full speed, and follow them up with a great flapping of wings. By long practice of this sort it made considerable progress, until it actually succeeded in flying a few feet, and then a few yards.

And lo! one radiant May morning we saw the happy bird fly with glorious freedom round the pond, high above the fir-trees! It was a splendid sight! We cheered the gallant bird to the echo, and sang: For he's a jolly good fellow at the top of our voices. Excitement was tremendous. Harry rushed off at full speed, bounced in at the front door, regardless of the door-mat's command to wipe his feet, sped through the hall, and burst in-

to the drawing-room. He said he knocked, but he had opened the door before any had time to say "Come in."

"Oh, Miss Porchester, the gull flying round the pond! Do come and see!"

You may be sure she came and saw, and shared in the general rejoicing with true sympathy.

Then, two days afterwards, when the wings were harmonised and attuned to the rhythm of flight when the rapture of new life was thoroughly awakened, and the wind coming in from the sea whispered some message of breaking waves and breezy cliffs, that gull said good-bye to his envious companions. Free as the winds of heaven, we saw it rise to a great height over the pond; and then, after wheeling in one majestic circle, it headed away to the towards south. We watched it till it dwindled to a speck and we saw it no more.

The Doctor had been a spectator of this entrancing scene. He rejoiced at the gull's recovery of flight and freedom. His eye moistened as he said, "Facket, it is like a resurrection to new life; it reminds me of the words, Oh, what the joy and the glory must be!"

"It was a beautiful sight!" said his sister.

"I wish the others would follow its example! The poor draggle-winged things! It is a dishonour to the beauty of bird life!"

Alas! the others could not! Two of them made resolute efforts—three hops and a flurry of flaps repeated in a scurry half-way across the field. This practice was kept up daily by the hour. Then they relapsed into long periods of moody silence, standing one-legged on the gravelly margin of the island.

The other gull took no part in such proceedings. Its lame wing seemed to have been more severely dealt with—oh! the pity of it! Possibly the cruel hand that cut it had maimed the delicate mechanism incurably. The wing trailed so hopelessly when the piteous creature travelled from one spot to another, that the bird made a grotesque exhibition of itself. It seemed wofully discouraged, and lost all heart, and at last grew tired of life. Harry could not lure it to take any food. It kept apart from the other two, moped and miserable, with plumage always ruffled. Then it passed whole days on one leg, with its head resting on its back towards the tail. And one day it did not appear at all.

Harry got leave to punt over to the island and search for it. He found it dead behind a clump of narrow grass.

So now the Doctor's sea-gulls were reduced to two. And this pair kept together, wondering what it all meant; they came to be fed side by side; they practised their attempts at flight together; they sometimes ventured on short prom-enades out of bounds, crossing the road into the wood.

Such was their daily routine through May and June, until one day in July, when Harry could no find them at feeding time.

CHAPTER II.

Old Mother Scrubhard was hurrying down the Highfield drive. That was not her real name—merely a nick-name coined in the mint of schoolboy jocosity. Her real name was Mary Brown, but that did not count. The boys of Highfield House recognized her as Mother Scrubhard.

They were familiar with a round-about back view of the dame, on all fours, striving by soap and scrub to put a decent aspect upon floors and passages soiled by their profane feet.

She was the wife of Punchey Brown, whose name has figured before now in the annals of the House. Every Highfield boy remembers the punch-like face, with its small, black ferret eyes, denoting keen rebuff for driving a hard bargain over nuts and apples and kindred commodities.

His wife used to attend at Highfield House on Fridays and Saturdays, for cleaning and scrubbing. She might be seen weekly on either of those days hurrying off home after dinner, in her antiquated black pushroom hat and drab shawl, carrying a basket that looked heavy. I would not insinuate a shade of suspicion against her honesty; but we boys were often curious to know what that basket contained. To this day I wonder if Dr. Forchester or his sister ever shared our curiosity.

No doubt the basket might have held merely the lawful perquisites of her vocation—soap, scrubbing brush, flannels, and such like. But on one occasion certainly there was proof positive of other contents.

It happened when a few mischievous members of our community were larking together, as the old dame came out of the kitchen-yard, bound on her homeward cruise. By some mischance, accidentally brought about on purpose, or otherwise the basket was upset, and some of its contents got abroad. There was a fair-sized lump of meat, and a hunk of cheese, and a smash of eggs, and two or three candies.

We asked her if she had been to market, and she got angry. She said she was only taking home the remains of her dinner, she hadn't an appetite, and couldn't finish all the cook gave her. Very probable. And no doubt the candies were thoughtfully provided by the cook in case a fog should overtake her on the way. She always took the short cut through the woods, and there were pitfalls and swampy places, which would need careful discrimination if a fog suddenly came on. Her son Thomas was the doctor's footman at that time.

Mother Scrubhard lived in a cottage a long way past the farm which had a haunted barn if you went by the road. The house opposite that farm had a like evil repute. It was said that coffins were heard being dragged about the passages at night. It seems strange that the neighborhood of Deepwells never provided material for that interesting book,

'The Haunted Homes of England.' For if half the legends that we boys used to revel over were true, they might have furnished copy for an extra chapter all to themselves.

On that afternoon, Mother Scrubhard with her basket was making for the short cut through the pine wood. She bustled along with purpose in her steps, for it was Saturday, and there was a deal of week-end cleaning to be done in her cottage.

Now the two sea-gulls had taken the occasion for a promenade in the wood, and never until that afternoon had Mother Scrubhard set eyes on them. The pond did not come within her beat or range of view when she paid her periodical visits to the House.

As she pursued her way among the fragrant pines, she caught sight of two birds, pearly-grey, waddling before her along the path. Her knowledge of birds was not extensive; she knew a duck from a goose, and a turkey from a peacock, and she had practical acquaintance with the common barn-door poultry.

But there, in front of her, were a couple of birds neither duck nor goose nor any ordinary fowl. They could only be pigeons, she thought—and yet they were different. Ah—she had it! They must be some of those outlandish pigeons which the farmers had down occasionally for their shooting. She noticed the droop of wings as the birds shuffled along in their hop-and-go-one style. The poor things had been wounded at the shooting, she thought, and here was a chance. A brace of pigeons would make a nice pie. "Punchey" (she sometimes called him "Brown"); we boys never knew if he had any other name "would relish a pigeon-pie."

Mother Scrubhard licked her lips at the thought, and quickened her pace, fired with determination to bag, or rather basket, the brace, if possible. She came nearer to running than she had ever come in the last forty years.

The birds took alarm, and scurried their fastest, but the pursuer gained on them. So they left the path, and scrambled away to rougher ground, intersected by trenches (originally dug for draining purposes), with rabbit-burrows thrown in and brambly thickets here and there. The dame, nothing daunted, folloved over the difficult course. She could not clear the trenches at a bound—she had to climb down into them and climb out. But the gulls had to do the same. It was a queer sort of an obstacle race, and the old dame had the worst of it, for her joints were stiff and her breath grew wheezy and her limbs weary with the unaccustomed exertion.

The birds might have escaped if they had kept up these tactics. But, poor things, they, too, felt the sturm and stress of the race. Those helpless crippled wings had to be dragged along like so much useless lumber, and the sound wings, doing double duty, taxed their strength with grievous exhaustion.

At last they brought up, dead-beat, at the bottom of a trench in a hollow of

blunt-wed sand. They put their backs against the sandy wall, and faced the foe with valor worthy of a better cause, uttering hoarse croaks, and snapping their bills in impotent protest. But what avails it to prolong the agony?

Mother Scrubhard saw her opportunity when she was on the point of abandoning the chase. One more flump, and she was in the trench. Then, like a gladiator of the return class, throwing out a flap of her shawl, she enveloped the birds in its folds; and after a deal of clumsy manoeuvring, she succeeded in cramming first one, and then the other bird into her basket. She jammed down the lid, made it fast, caught up the basket, and set off for home.

There she arrived at last, wearied by the tollsome march. The basket had proved a heavy burden, and she put it down with a peevish impetuosity, which must have caused an extra spasm of discomfort to the imprisoned birds. What did she care?

She would just take off her hat and shawl, and then she would ring thrir necks, and hang them up in her larder, and make Punchey pluck them when he came back from market.

Well, so she did—as concerned the hat and shawl. And she had every intention of performing the second part of the programme. But when she put a hand into the basket and pulled out a struggling bird, and brought the other hand to bear, to feel the bird and estimate its plumpness, she was staggered to find the wretched thing little more than "a bag of bones," as she said. For truly, in spite of Harry Dawson's daily doles of meat, the gulls had never enjoyed what might be called a square meal.

A gull's appetite, as Dr. Porchester remarked, is voracious. In the wild state gulls like to gorge themselves with fish whole and wholesome. Odd scraps of mutton and beef make but a poor substitute for nature's more generous and nutritious diet. Furthermore, it is probable that the gull, which flew so grandly on that blithe May day, being stronger than the others, had always managed to get the lion's share of Harry's meat. Anyhow, when Mother Scrubhard felt over her captured birds, she found them in as sick and sorry a condition as could badly be.

"You miserable critters!" she exclaimed, with withering disdain. "After giving me all that trouble! Call yourse'fs pigeons? Why, I'd be ashamed to stick you up as boggarts in a cornfield! You're not worth wringing, let alone plucking! No—it ain't no use struggling and making a fuss. Drop it, I say.—Would you?—You're not going to get off so cheap, my young sea-crows. I've got you, and I'll keep you. I'll see if I can't put some meat on your scraggy carcases before we think of pie. Come along!"

She bundled the birds once more into the basket, and took them off to the bit of back-garden behind the cottage, where there was a make-shift fowl-yard, put together with hits of board and wire netting. A fox had lately got in

and made havoc of her poultry stock, so the premises were to let, and that was the only bit of luck about the job, as she expressed it. She had a way of talking herself when alone, for company's sake.

Mother Scrubhard accordingly turned the gulls loose in the fowl-yard, and at once took measures for the fattening. She tossed in a few decayed cabbage-stumps and ends of week-old bread, and a heap of odds and ends from the dust-hole, including tea-leaves from ancient brews that had done service in cleaning her kitchen floor. And having wasted more time and trouble than the precious birds were worth, as she said, she returned indoors to bustle about her house-cleaning. There we may leave her.

Harry Dawson was much distressed on Sunday morning, as the gulls had not returned. He consulted Miss Popenster, who advised him to go and look for them. She said he might take a friend out in the afternoon—for, as a rule, Sunday walks were not allowed.

So, after dinner, Harry and a companion set forth on a search expedition. The companion was known among us at the time by the name, Jemmy Jar-jar. He was none other than Jemmy Browser, whose history has already been set forth at length. He once wrote to his uncle, George Towser, asking for a pot of jam. Uncle Towser responded with that large-hearted generosity so eminently characteristic of his nature.

He sent Jemmy a noble, tone-ware jar that stood up two feet in height, with circumference in proportion—a regular mammoth of a jar, with a label inscribed in enormous capitals, Household Jam, Strawberry, 12 lb. net. We came in to tea, one evening, and there stood that gigantic monument before Browser's plate. Such a hum of wonder and admiration ensued, that silence for "grace" was not easily obtained. Nothing short of a gravy-spoon was of any use in exploring the depths of Browser's jam-jar, and its memory can never have faded from the mind of any Highland boy who tasted its contents. We may have forgotten our Greek verbs, or the gender of a Latin noun, but Jemmy's jam-jar—never!

Harry and Jemmy went into the wood. They called at the white house by the sawmill, where the great chestnut trees grew—the famous "Cheeser-land" of October fame, where pocketfuls of sweet chestnuts were to be had for the picking-up. What boilings in old biscuit-tins, what roastings at the school-room fire on chill afternoons we had, between football and tea-time!

No news of the missing gulls was to be heard at the white house. Farmer Cox said it was a wild-goose chase they were after.

"If they were a dog we could whistle for them," said Jemmy.

"We may whistle for them, though they ain't," said Harry; "but I doubt if we shall catch them. Pity we've forgotten the salt. It's jolly being out here, anyhow. Let us go to the Fritillary

Marsh—that's a likely place; lots of food in the swamp; their instinct would tell them that."

They went to that blissful region where the pearl-bordered fairies lit so gracefully in the long summer afternoons, and the spikes of bog-asphodel stand up like lighted candles with their golden bloom, and the purple orchis mingles a profusion of color in harmonious contrast.

Harry and Jimmy crunched the lush wealth of greenery under foot, stopping continually to notice some fresh attraction—especially the dragon-flies that haunted the brook-side with flopping wings, peacock-blue and black. I never saw them except in Fritillary Marsh.

The boys forgot the object of their quest, their zeal for nature's charms, until at last Harry looked at his watch.

"Hurry!" he said, "why it's ten to four! Now the time has flown! We must hurry back! What a nuisance! Well, it can't be helped, we must have another try to-morrow."

And so they did—or at least Harry did, for Jimmy, as usual, was "detained" by less agreeable occupations. Harry did not ask anyone else to go; he thought he should get over the ground quicker alone, because he always stopped to look for something when he had a companion.

He went through the village and inquired at the postoffice. They had not heard of any gulls. He went to John Galpin, the butcher, and the boy Samuel came out, and said he didn't know nothing about no body-oids. Then Harry worked his way by Hawthorn Glen to Mosterton Marsh, asking at every cottage without success. Then he reluctantly took the homeward turn up Nightingale Lane, which brought him presently to that bit of ragged garden behind Punchey Brown's cottage.

It was as sorry a bit of ground as ever had the impertinence to call itself a garden. Its owner seemed to hold it in no esteem. The cottage stood on a small triangle of land, formed by the forked end of a lane where it joined the main road. Just at the angle of the fork was the garden, enclosed by a few scraggy bushes, the gaps between them being closed by rough stakes and hoop-iron from old casks, in a sort of patchwork apology for a fence.

Harry pulled up with a sudden jerk. "Could it be? Was it possible? Yes—beyond a doubt, there were the two gulls! He made the chucking noise which would remind them of feeding-time, and they turned their heads slightly in his direction. That was all their spirits were haunted by the thrabdom of anagke (that terrible word, inscribed by some despairing hand on the wall of the Bastille, which inspired one of Victor Hugo's hametral works).

But, joy! Harry had found them! He ran round to the cottage and bounced in, for there were three jars of lollipops in the window, and a bag of Brazil nuts, and two bottles of ginger-beer, so it was a shop, and anyone might enter without knocking.

"I say, Mother Scrubland, how ever did you get the sea-gulls? I'm so glad you found them! Lend me a basket—I'll take them back."

The old woman's head at him up and down for some moments in stolid surprise. Then she said:

"Well, to be sure! Who ever heard the likes of that? If it wasn't for the cap which shows you come from the school, I'd have taken you for an escapee from the asylum. Sea-gulls? That's good! Are you sure they ain't ostridges? Sea-gulls, indeed!"

"What do you mean?" said Harry. "You've got the doctor's sea-gulls in the garden. I must take them back!"

"Oh, you must, must you?" When I was a gull they wouldn't allow me to say 'must.' But young gents at school is different, no doubt, though it seems they don't trouble much about manners! But you be joking, Master P'pish, sure—ly!"

Harry got rather excited, and probably made some rude remarks (he was rather vague in his report of the interview), and Mother Scrubland was made decidedly angry.

"How dare you come here, Master Popnjay, accusing an honest woman, old enough to be your grandmother, of stealing? If Punchey were here, he'd wallop you for your impudence! I've a mind to do it myself! Stealing sea-gulls! You ought to know better! You ought to be ashamed of yourself! But as you ain't just be off about your own business, and leave honest folks alone! I'll tell Mr. Porchester, that I will! No, I won't—I'll take a shorter cut, and get a summons against you from the policeman, and you'll have to go before the Magistrate, and he'll teach you! He'll send you to jail for Ehellous accusation, that he will, and serve you right! Them birds is pigeons, wounded by the farmers at their shooting. I caught them in the wood, as anyone else might have done. And lawful findings is lawful keepings—as is a law of the land, and I'm going to make them into a pigeon-pie. So now you know all about it, and you'd best pack yourself off to school, and learn your lessons instead of bothering your head about sea-gulls. And you can expect the policeman about tea-time. There's the door!"

Harry was cowed by the vehemence of this tirade. His horror of a policeman had never abated since that day at Eastbourne, when the driver of the bathing-machine threatened him with a similar visitation. He slunk out of the cottage in abject fear, and the woman banged the door behind him. He took a few tottery steps and then stopped.

At all costs he must try and pacify her. So he went back to the cottage and opened the door.

"Please, Mrs. Brown, I'm very sorry. I didn't mean to accuse you of stealing. I only thought you had made a mistake."

"Oh, you didn't, didn't you? And you did, did you? But you won't get off by whimpering. You wilfully brought a

libello: hincensation against a honest woman.

"Please don't tell the policemen."

"Not tell the policeman? But I will, though! It's a prison job, all the world over."

"Oh, Mrs. Brown, please, pl---"

But she pushed him out in her passion, and slammed the door again, and Harry heard the key grind as she turned the lock.

There was nothing for it but to go back to school, and Harry could hardly drag his legs after him.

We noticed how glum he looked that evening. His hand shook he had a frightened expression, he turned white at tea when the door bell rang. We thought he was going to have the measles. He never got anywhere in the dormitory. He just got into bed and buried himself under the sheet, and we neither heard nor saw anything more of him till the next morning.

CHAPTER III

The Tuesday that followed was one of July's best efforts at summer heat. Afternoon school sorely tested the energy of Mr. Fields. Boys may slacken the mental tension and indulge to some extent the drowsy languor that oppresses the intellect in the afternoons of the dog-days. But masters have to battle against the inclination towards slumbrous relaxation, if anything like a fair tab of work is to be exacted from the boys.

Mr. Fields was taking his class in the spacious dining-hall, with every window open to its widest extent, including the great folding windows which gave passage into the garden.

Mr. Fields nerved himself with an effort little short of heroic. The lesson was Latin prose with the second class, and Dawson was at his worst. As he was top of the class, what must the rest have been?

The Master doled out the green books of exercises on the Latin primer to the boys. He took up his own well-worn copy, and the lesson began.

"Now, then, boys, our old friend the compound sentence. 'Cats have clawses' as the board-school boy wrote in his famous essay; and compound sentences have clauses. You can all say my memorial line for the adverbial clauses."

Chorus of, "Conse-Fi, Causal-Tem Conditional, Concessi, Compar."

"All right! Now, then, page 92 conditional clauses. Four kinds, introduced by Si."

It was old ground, often trodden before. The boys could say the examples given, and the master led them with others of the same kind. But the oppressive heat "obfuscated their intelligence," as the master remarked, and sorely taxed his patience.

"If you lose the books which I give you you will pay the penalty. Which of the four kinds of conditional sentence is that, Dawson?"

"Number 2, sir."

"Quite right. Now, boys, what case is which?"

General Chorus, "Genitive! Ablative! Nominative! Accusative! Dative!"

"Just so! And nobody says Vocative. What a Shame! Why should poor old the vocative be always snubbed? You are unkind! You said genitive, Dawson, and if I ask you why you said genitive, you'll hoot and sculk, and babble, and squeak, to invent a reason. You do all alike, you'll load your handkerchiefs up to the muzzles, and breeze me with ease, since I have a better case than any, to suit your whim, Nominativegen, dative, a little of all sorts, and some of it's sure to be right."

Various species of sappy laughter inundated through the class. The boys liked to encourage Mr. Field's little jokes.

Then the lesson proceeded with solid endeavor on the master's part to interest the attention and illumine the mental obscurity. Presently he jumped up, and going to the black-board, he said,

"Let me try a new plan. I feel like Lord Byron, 'I stood at Venice on the Bridge of Signs.' Why not? Si vales, hinc est, Si fecceris, etc, Si venias, gaudeam, Si venisses, gavisus essem. Four clear and distinct kinds—four arches of a bridge. Let me draw them the Bridge of Si-s!"

He drew a curved line across the board and four arches under it, and numbered them 1, 2, 3, 4.

"Now look, boys! If you go to Rome, you will see the forum—which arch does that come under?"

The boys were all looking at the blackboard with some glow of interest, when the momentary silence was startled by a shrill, piping voice:

"Please, sir, mother wants two penn'orth of dripping, to make a pigeon-pie."

Every head was turned in the direction of that voice, and a genuine riot of laughter burst in a the boys. They saw a diminutive child standing at the open folding windows, with a basket in his hand.

"Eh? what?" said the master, when the turmoil had abated. "Dripping, did you say? Yes, rather so!" (passing his handkerchief over his brow. "But you have come to the wrong department—it's not for sale here, first turn to the left, try at the back door.")

The mention of pigeon-pie made Dawson turn white. There might yet be time to save the gulls. His terror of Mother Scrubbard's threats had so far sealed his tongue, it was now or never. He gulped down his fears, and said with nervous energy:

"Please, sir, don't let him have the dripping!"

"Why not, boy? He is going to pay for it. Why should you deny him such a simple luxury?"

"They are the sea-gulls, sir. Mother Scrubbard's got them—she thinks they are pigeons!"

"Oho! That's good! She is going to make sea-gulls into a pigeon-pie, is she?"

Clever woman! The philosopher's stone will turn green with envy!

"Won't you stop her, so?"

"Stop her? Oh? why, yes, to be sure! We cannot have her scattering the doctor's seagulls. For, if they do, my comments, I will go and see that doctor's son."

"It may be too late," said Harry.

Mr. Fields pondered a moment.

"You allow, Mr. Harry, that I had what you call a 'Familiar' in my class to play hopscotch. Was it done?"

"Let us go with you, sir."

"I do believe it is the only way out of the difficulty," said the master, who was very nervous about the seagulls. "I am afraid it must be done by boys. Very properly put away the books. Come along!"

Stolen waters are not pleasant. How delightful was that unexpected rain through the pine-wood! The sweet fragrance of the pines to-day. We trotted busily and joyfully out before young John Brown had returned with the dripping.

The boys waited outside while Mr. Fields went in.

"I say, Mrs. Brown, what is this about pigeons? You have made a mistake it appears. Where are the birds? Can I have a look at them?"

"There's no mistake as I know of, sir. I found them in the wood, wounded by the shooters. Poor soul of scorn, I'm thinking, to shut up birds in a trap and let them out dazed like to be tortured! I wonder it's allowed I do!"

"True enough, Mrs. Brown, your sentiments do credit to your kind heart. But I can't help thinking you are mistaken. Ma, I see the birds?"

"I don't see as there's any need for you to trouble, sir. They're pigeons right enough though an outlandish sort. They're in the garden. If you'd come five minutes later I'd have been drucking them. I had just gone out to wring their necks when you came in."

"The neck of time," said Mr. Fields; "so I will go and look at 'em."

Mrs. Brown was still inclined to demur, but the master's insistence prevailed, and she reluctantly led the way.

"There they are, sir, and if they aren't pigeons, I'd like to know what they are!"

"That is soon told," he said, taking a rapid glance at the two birds slanting disconsolate on one leg in a corner of their prison-yard. "They are seagulls, Mrs. Brown, and they belong to Dr. Porechester. If you will lend me a basket, I will take them back."

"Oh, but how am I to know that? You may be a learned Oxford gentleman, but, seagulls you say and pigeons I say; and who's to tell which of us is right? I wish Punchey was at home. I can't think what has become of him—he went to Dorchester market, and he's been gone nearly a week. Never knowed him away so long before. He'd know the rights of them birds, I'd warrant!"

"Well, Mrs. Brown, Punchey would tell

you they are seagulls, and it is a dilemma to think you can make them into a pigeon too. You must not go winking their necks, because they belong to Dr. Porechester. Still, I don't want to be hard on you. You found them in the wood. You took pity on them and brought them home, you may be tried to do, and expect me to feed 'em. There's a shilling for you, and now go and try them back."

"Well, sir, I don't know," said Mrs. Brown, "but I'll do my best to keep 'em. They say, and I can't get a pair of pigeons for a shilling."

You might try a pair, make a pigeon, and one of seagulls. You will be a shilling longer, and save a few minutes. Let me have the basket, please."

"I don't say I do, but I'll do my best," said Mrs. Brown, who was at home. "He's a good fellow, he's a good fellow, and I'll do my best to keep 'em. They say, and I can't get a pair of pigeons for a shilling."

"No, Mrs. Brown, I cannot do that. I must have them now, and I am in a hurry."

With a very bad grace, the old dame fetched the basket. Mr. Fields cornered the gulls, and, after much ineffectual flapping they were safely shut in.

"Come along, boys," he said, as he came out. "We must look sharp and get back, or I shall get into a row. Now, or you can carry the basket."

"Have you really got them, sir? Did Mother Scudbard mind letting you have them?"

"She was not very cheerful about it, but I gained the point, so their necks are still sound."

"It was lucky we were in time, sir. If we had waited five minutes it would have been too late."

"A condition, I believe, Harry. We can continue the lesson as we go along."

But Harry IV. answered, "Oh, sir!" and galloped on out of range. The idea of conditional clauses out in the open air, under the blue sky, was too incongruous to be seriously considered.

They met young John Brown returning with his two pennyworth of dripping. And they treated him to a fair amount of chaff. For John took it for he was founder of five birds, I am dead birds."

"I be glad you saved them necks," he said, and they gave him a cheer and a shilling for his cool and generous behaviour.

CHAPTER IV

Miss Porechester expressed her satisfaction at the recovery of the gulls, though I doubt if she had really regretted their temporary absence. She had made it a matter of duty to feed them daily, and the task had proved irksome at times, especially when rain necessitated gologues and an umbrella. I fancy she felt like a boy excused from an imposition while the truants were on leave.

Be this as it may, a few days later she

sent for Dawson, and said she knew how fond he was of animals, and how kind he was to them, and as a reward she would like to make him a present of the gulls.

Harry thanked her warmly, and Miss Porchester was pleased. She thought what nice manners he had.

It will be an object of interest to you Harry, to feed them and look after them. You may ask the cook for the meat every day after breakfast. I hope you will succeed in taming and civilizing them, and making them really an attractive ornament of the grounds."

Harry showed a lively interest in his charge. He had a good old-fashioned wooden whistle, with an honest pea in its throat, which sent forth a fluty note with a pleasant flutter, correcting all harshness and imparting a musical tone. Its sound floated harmoniously on the air, and did not offend the Doctor's sensitive ear. Yet the Doctor had qualms about allowing it. All musical toys were strictly forbidden by the rules of the school, and when first the Doctor heard the whistle, he pricked up his ears and hurried off to dis, over the off nder.

Harry had need of all the diplomatic art at his command to explain that he was trying to accustom the gulls to come for their dinner at the sound of the whistle.

"Well, my boy, I am not sure that I approve of the plan. If you are allowed to use your whistle, other boys will expect the same indulgence. We shall have them all trying to train the gulls. We have had plagues of brazen horns, root-toots, jews'-harps, drums, penny whistles, gongs manufactured on the premises out of biscuit-tins. The rule was made to prevent the nuisance of such barbaric noises. I do not feel comfortable about allowing your whistle."

"I'll only use it for the gulls, sir. Mayn't I try it? It would save a lot of time if I could train them to come at its call."

The Doctor's brow contracted as he paused a moment to reflect. With some reluctance he presently consented, not actually to forbid it. He would give it a trial, and if he saw the shadow of a reason to think it was becoming a nuisance, the whistle would be confiscated.

Harry was careful not to risk his chance by any unlawful performance of the fluty notes. For many days there was no result, but perseverance gradually won its way to some success. The gulls learnt to connect the ideas of whistle and food. The warbling notes brought them from one leg to two, then they wagged their tails and took to the water, and finally they showed such ready obedience to the call that Miss Porchester regarded it as a distinct advance towards civilization.

Another symptom of more friendly patroness with satisfaction. They took guard for mankind was noticed by their coming up towards the house in the evening, and instead of sleeping on the island, as had always been their habit,

they often passed the night among the shrubs round the house. Miss Porchester was much gratified by this favorable turn.

"Really, John," she said to her brother, "the gulls are proving quite a success. Harry deserves great credit for his success in reforming their character. They will soon be completely domesticated."

But Harry regarded that innovation of roosting among the shrubs with uneasiness. He knew that a lank black cat often prowled about the garden at night. He had shivered ere now when demon screeches suddenly roused the silence of night and startled him out of a sound sleep. He was sure that green-eyed monster would make short work of the gulls if it happened to come across them in the course of a nocturnal prowl.

"I should like to make them a safe sleeping place," he said to Miss Porchester. "I could easily do it with fir poles and wire netting. Do you think I might?"

Miss Porchester thought it a good idea. She went with Harry to select a suitable spot, and they decided upon a small clearing among the shrubs under the window of Harry's dormitory.

"I shall be able to hear them at night," he said, "if anything alarms them. But I hope we shall make their castle strong enough to defy the cat."

Harry got three of his dormitory mates, Hercules, Simpkins and Browser, to help him in the work. John Carey produced the fir-poles from the wood-yard, and the wire netting came from somewhere. They worked at odd times, and in a week they had built a very respectable concern. A packing case, set up on end, made a good shelter from rain. They were very proud of the result.

"It is a jolly sight better than the one at Pimpley Brown's," said Harry.

"Rather so," said Browser.

It was no easy matter getting the gulls to take advantage of their safe retreat. For several evenings it was only effected by careful strategy. But one day an itinerant fishmonger called with a cart-load of sprats and Harry bought a supply. And that evening, at roosting time, he threw a sprat to each gull as they were coming up to the house.

They had never tasted such a tit bit since they left their native haunts on the cliffs of Connemara. They came on eagerly, and asked for more as plainly as gull-language and movement could make it. Harry presented other sprats towards them, and lured them on till they were close to the open door. Then he tossed the contents into the enclosure, and the gulls scurried in after them. So long as the sprats lasted all was plain sailing at bed-time. And before the sun rose the following morning, matters had proceeded so successfully that the whistle was enough to call the gulls, and they went to the familiar place without giving unnecessary trouble.

John Carey was given strict instructions for looking after the gulls in the

holidays. But the old fellow, though he professed all anxiety to do everything he was told, did not believe in that "cadding," as he termed it.

"They'd be wild birds," he said, "and they are best left to their natural proclivities. Their instinct ought to tell 'em what's good for them."

So he just fed them daily, and he left the door of the enclosure open, and never bothered his head as to where they slept at night.

When Harry returned to school he found the birds sadly demoralized. It took him a month to drill them into shape, and expenditure on sprats was a heavy item in his fiscal economy. He pleaded with the fish-monger for a preferential tariff, but without success.

And now we come to the exciting part of this humble drama—so cheer up, my boy-reader!

On a dismal, foggy evening in November, Mother Scrubhard was busy over her washtub in the kitchen of the cottage. Punchey had gone out that morning, and had not yet returned. There had been some mystery about his movements ever since that time when he attended Dorchester market and had been absent a week. His wife had her curiosity aroused. She plied him with questions and tried to make him explain his conduct, but he showed an obstinate front and met her advances with surly insolence. We boys of Highfield House worried over his frequent absence from the gate. Our commissariat was considerably impoverished by the want of his basket of apples and nuts.

Mother Scrubhard had her arms up to elbows in soap-suds. The flickering firelight made fantastic play of shadows on the walls, and flashed the steamy vapors into lurid clouds around her. She might have posed for a witch concocting evil broth in her caldron, with

Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,

Lizard's leg and owl's wing.

Suddenly three sharp knocks with a stick sounded on the outer door. The dame's heart gave a jump—she was not accustomed to visitors at such a time. She hastily dried her hands and went to the door. She opened it, and a gleam of fire-light rested on the face of a man. She started back, scared by his repulsive appearance. A rabbit-skin cap fitted his head close—his nose was twisted askew, and one eye had an ugly squint.

"Be you Mrs. Brown?" asked the man.

"Yes. What may you want?"

"Well, it's this way—I want a bit of a talk with you. In the first place, mum, can I come in? You've no cause to be afeared. I'm not what you might call a handsome chap to look at, but I don't mean no harm."

Mother Scrubhard was scarcely reassured by this announcement, but she dared not refuse, and the man came in.

He took off his cap, and brushed the fur with his sleeve. He looked up, and he looked down; and then he spoke.

"It's like this, mum. Your man has had a bit of an accident, as you may say—nothing to seriously alarm you—but a

bit of an accident. Well, you see, 'twas somehow like this. We was up at the 'Bird in Hand,' me and a few pals, and Brown came in and got arguifying with one of the chaps. Summat to do with a bet over at Dorchester time of the market last July, when they had some horse-racing on. Then there was a bit of rum-pus, and Brown, he took to flinging pewter-pots about. And, you see, one of them pots came against a chap's head, and pretty high did for him. And then the other chaps set upon Brown, and kinder gave him what for. And one way or t'other there was a regular fuss up at the 'Bird in Hand,' and the landlord thought as you had better go up yonder, and get your man to go home. That's how it is, mum."

Such gruesome news might well agitate a woman of ordinary nerve, and Mrs. Brown was not indifferent to its serious nature. But she was not one to make the worst of things, and she met the troubles of life with certain stolid philosophy. She controlled her emotions, and said:

"Ah, there—Brown, he always was a wilful man, and a wilful man must have his way. It's a reg'lar bad job; but I'll fetch him home right enough."

She put on her mushroom hat and wrapped the drab shawl round her shoulders, and set off for the "Bird in Hand."

Things had quieted down a bit by the time she arrived. The victim of the pewter-pot had recovered from the blow, and had gone off with his pals. Punchey was huddled up in a corner of the settle. His wife went to him, and, finding him in better condition than she had feared, she pulled him by the arm, and said:

"Come along, Punchey, old man; you go home with me."

"All right, Mary," he replied, and slowly got upon his legs. Then, leaning heavily on her arm, he shuffled out into the fog.

A night's rest went far towards restoring Punchey Brown to his normal vigour. Beyond a head-ache, inside and out, he did not feel much the worse. He ate his breakfast as usual and afterwards smoked his pipe. Then his wife made a bid for judicial inquiry, which was not very successful owing to the prisoner's attitude towards the hench.

"So that's what you were after at Dorchester, was it?—going to the race-course along with low chaps; betting and losing money as you hadn't got and couldn't pay! A nice thing for a respectable man, with a wife and family!"

Punchey snuffed sullenly at his pipe, and made no reply.

"You may well be ashamed of yourself. I'd never have thought it of you! But I'd like to know how much you lost, and if you mean to pay up, and, if so, how you are going to get the money. Nobody knows what you've been up to lately; the young gents at the school are always askin', 'Where's Punchey. Why doesn't he bring his basket?' You're neglectin' your business, and I'd like to

know what you have to say for yourself."

Punchey sat tight and said nothing, while his wife clattered with cups and plates and kept up a running comment on her husband's short-comings. When she had stowed the crockery in the cupboard, she gave him her undivided attention.

"Are you going to sit there all day like a boggart in a field? Why don't you speak up like a man, and make a clean breast of it?"

Punchey persisted in obstinate silence for a long while, though his wife plied him with the heaviest calibre of her vocal artillery. At last he got up and put on his hat. Then, facing his wife with a bear-eyed grimace, he vouchsafed a few remarks:

"Look here, Mary, it ain't no use your palaverin'; it don't take no more effect than rain on a tomb-stone; and if you jaw till night you won't get another word out of me than what I tell you now."

He paused a moment to give full force to that assurance, and then he added:

"I've got into a hole, and I've got to get out of it, and that's what I'm going to do. And that's all you'll get by way of information on the subjick, so you'd better spare your breath."

With this final pronouncement, Punchey passed out of the cottage, and slammed the door behind him.

CHAPTER V.

Now whether that fracas at the "Bird in Hand" had anything to do with a certain incident that followed close in its wake, was never actually determined at the time. It caused flutter enough at the moment, but it soon faded into ancient history, passed away, and was forgotten.

If Sherlock Holmes had been about in those days, and the matter had happened to engage his attention, no doubt he would have sifted the details in such convincing style as to make all clear to the meanest intelligence. But there was no very efficient expert in the detective craft to piece together the scraps of evidence, and so the rights (or rather wrongs) of the matter were only shadowed in a murky twilight, which blurred the outlines beyond the discrimination of local insight.

But the editor's blue pencil will be wanted if we heat about the bush. "Straight to the point" is the rule with B.O.P. writers, and we must not break the rule.

One night, in the week after that disturbance at the "Bird in Hand," Tim Simpkins, who slept in Dawson's dormitory, was roused from sleep by the cries of the sea-gulls down below. Dawson had given strict orders that, if ever the birds were heard to give tongue while he was asleep, he was to be awakened immediately. He never felt entirely comfortable about that green-eyed black cat. The solemn darkness magnified the cat's

strength and ferocity into appalling proportions, while it caused the fir-poles and wire to dwindle into match-wood and brittle thread. If the beast were to make a determined onslaught upon Gull Castle it would surely effect a breach, and Harry shuddered at the thought of the result.

Simpkins listened a minute. The cries were repeated in snarling tones, betokening fear. He called in a loud whisper:

"Dawson! Dawson!" Then a little louder: "Harry! Harry! I say, Harry!"

"What is it?" asked a muffled, sleepy voice.

"The gulls are barking!"

"Eh? What? The gulls?" Harry sprang up, wide awake in a moment. He went to the window and cautiously opened it. The gulls were still uttering their cries of alarm.

"I do believe it's that beast of a cat!" said Harry, as he drew back. "I'll wake up Hercules. We must go down."

Hercules was a sound sleeper, and needed a deal of shoving before a weary growl could be extorted from him.

"Wake up, old snorer!" said Harry. "Wake up! The cat's after the gulls! We must go down!"

"Hang the cat!"

"That's what I want you to come and do!"

Hercules, ready for an adventure even when half asleep, rose up like a small earthquake.

"Fetch the lamp in the passage, Simpkins," said Harry. "We must put on a rag or two."

The lamp was fetched, and the two defenders hurriedly prepared.

Their felt slippers made no noise as they went downstairs.

"How shall we get out?" whispered Harry.

"Through the window of the dining-hall. Let us get a couple of stumps."

The boys slipped quickly along the passage to get the stumps, and then scudded for the dining-hall. While passing the pantry, Hercules suddenly pulled Harry's sleeve, and brought him to a halt. The pantry-door was ajar, and a light shone through the chink.

"Hush!" Hercules whispered. "There's some one in there. I believe it's a burglar!"

"Oh!" shuddered Harry. "What shall we do?"

"H'sh! Don't move! He sure to have a revolver!"

They listened breathlessly. They heard the faintest tinkle of silver.

"He's getting at the plate!"

"Ah! I daren't go in — do you?"

"No. Wait. Hark!"

Then Hercules pointed to the door of the dining-hall, a few paces down the passage. They tip-toed to it, and went in, leaving the door open, and screening the light of their lamp. Then in low whispers they debated over the next move.

"I think we ought to go and wake up Mr. Fields," said Hercules. "He's brave

as a lion—he would tackle any burglar."

"Rather! I should think he would!"
"But one of us ought to stay down here and watch, and see that he doesn't escape."

"Oh!"
"Will you go or stay here, Harry? Take your choice."

"I think I'd sooner go. Don't you mind being left alone?"

"Not if you'll be quick—Hark!"
There was a rattle of spoons! "If he comes out I could dodge him through the other door and be upstairs before he had time to shoot. But look sharp, and go for Fields. It's now or never!"

"All right!"
Harry soon skipped across the hall. A lamp was always burning in it at night—and then he bounded up the stairs. Without a sound of his slipped feet he reached the door of Mr. Field's bedroom. After a gentle bombardment he succeeded in rousing the master. The door was opened.

"What's the matter?"
"Please, sir, we think there's a burglar in the pantry. Hercules is watching in the dining-hall. We are in a awful funk—please come down."

"A burglar, you think? Oh, where's my knuckleduster? Now, then, come along."

The staircase did not let the master descend without a creak of remonstrance, though he stepped as lightly as he could, close to the wall. And the master said "Hush!" by force of habit to the offending staircase.

They joined Hercules, who had an important report to make.

"He has come out of the pantry, sir. I heard the staircase creak as you came down, and I think he must have heard it, too, for he came out directly, and he went along the passage so fast and disappeared up the back stairs, so that I only just caught a glimmer of his back. I think it was only Thomas after all. Perhaps he had forgotten to put away the plate; but I can't be sure."

"It's a false alarm, it seems," said the master. "We'll just have a look at the pantry to make sure that all is right."

Mr. Fields took up the lamp, and the boys followed in his wake. He opened the pantry door and held the lamp aloft.

"It's all right, boys, it was probably only Thomas. What alarmed you at first, and made you come down?"

"The gulls were making a row, sir, and we thought it was the cat, and we came down to see."

"Did you mean to go outside the house?"

"Yes, sir," said Harry. "We got a couple of stumps, and were going through the dining-hall window, when we saw a light in the pantry, and we got in a funk. I'm sorry we disturbed you, sir, but we didn't know what to do."

"Quite right, boy; you did the proper thing. Let us go and see if the gulls are all right."

They returned to the dining-hall and opened the big window.

"They have settled down again," said Mr. Fields. "You need not bother about them any more."

"Oh, but, sir, perhaps the cat has got in and killed them. Mayn't I go and see if they are all right?" pleaded Harry.

"If you take the lamp you'll frighten them again."

"I don't want the lamp, sir."

Without waiting for further permission, Harry went out, and made his way through the darkness to the cage. Anxiety for the gulls had overcome his fear. He declared afterwards that he no longer felt in a funk.

He got safely to the cage, and made his chuckling noise, and he could just dimly perceive the gulls. They hopped to the side of the cage nearest him, perhaps hoping for a sprat. Harry put a finger through the wire, and actually stroked one of them.

"They are all right, sir," he said when he came back.

"Very well, then, off you go to bed again, and mind you don't wake up the other boys."

Harry and Hercules went back to their room, reassured and free from wild alarms. They were soon sound asleep.

Not so Mr. Fields. He had noticed sundry suspicious details in the pantry, which called for further investigation. He went to his study and lit a dark lantern. Then he returned to the pantry. Among other evidences foreboding mischief he observed that the window was unfastened. There was a large basket near it. He looked into the basket, and found it packed with some of the Doctor's best plate, all of solid silver—spoons and forks, salver, bowl, salt-cellars, teapot, cream-jug, sugar-basin.

Mr. Fields put the basket out of reach from the window. Then he turned on the dark slide of the lantern, drew the curtain partly across the window, and took his stand behind it. There, in the grim darkness, relieved by the faintest glimmer over the uncurtained part of the window, he waited and listened. The silence was so deep that he could hear the clock ticking in the hall. He heard a boy coughing in his sleep. The minutes passed slowly—he found himself counting the ticks of the pendulum. All his senses were on the alert; he gripped the knuckle-duster with a firm grasp.

Presently there was the faintest sound of a stealthy footstep outside—then a pause—then, very gently, the window was raised, till there was space enough for the basket to pass through. Then an arm was inserted and a hand felt about. Mr. Fields could dimly perceive a hooded, muffled figure, whether man or woman he could not tell. He waited till the hand was feeling along the ledge near him, and then, with a smart turn of the wrist, he brought the knuckle-duster down upon the hand.

There was a suppressed cry—and the hand was instantly withdrawn. In a moment he turned back the dark slide of the lantern and flashed the light

through the open window. It fell in great circle on the opposite angle of the wall, round which the marauder must instantly have dodged. The rush of retreat was distinctly heard. The master knew that it would be useless to follow. By the time he could get out of the house and round to the spot, the miscreant would, to all intents and purposes, be lost in the darkness. The master did not think it advisable to rouse the house to give chase. He had saved the plate, and it was not likely that a second attempt at robbery would be made that night. At any rate, somebody had carried off a mark which might lead to identification.

Mr. Fields bolted the pantry window and carried the basket of plate up to his bedroom, where he locked it safely in a cupboard. Then he went off quietly to the room where the footman slept, and listened at the door. Steady, sustained snores issued from within.

He did not return to his bedroom. He thought it might be as well to act the watchman down below. So he went into the hall and sat down in an arm-chair. The silence was conducive to thought. He pondered over the matter. If Hercules was not mistaken, Thomas must have been in league with someone outside, with a view to robbery of the plate. He must have left the window unfastened, and have packed and placed the basket within reach. If Hercules was mistaken — if Thomas was innocent of all complicity in the transaction — then the man that ran along the passage must have probably entered the house by some window upstairs, and have beat a retreat by the same route. He must have packed the loot, and, finding the basket too heavy when the creaking staircase warned him of danger, he left it near the open window, escaped as he entered, and went round to remove the basket. That seemed a very feasible theory.

Mr. Fields got up from the chair. He took his lantern and proceeded up the back stairs, examining the windows as he passed. He soon came to one which seemed to show that his last theory was right. A pane of glass had been carefully removed from a passage window, whereby the bolt could be turned. The window was wide open, and a burglarious-looking implement, which Mr. Fields believed to be a "jemmy," was lying on the window-sill. He noticed how the putty had been scraped away. He took up the pane of glass; it was soiled with greasy finger marks. If he had only known the value of those marks as a means of identifying a suspected person, he could have made certain whether or not Thomas had fingered that glass. But in those days that subtle method of investigation was not discovered.

Mr. Fields left these traces as he found them—it would be best to let the policeman see everything in place next day.

So the master went down to the hall once more, and again sat down in the arm-chair. He closed his eyes to assist his meditations, and as thoughts went revolving in his mind they began imperceptibly to fuse themselves into distorted

a combinations, until their tangled skeins dissolved in the mists of dreamland, and the master was asleep.

The small hours of night passed on. The clock in the hall ticked out the moments, the hands crept on slowly and surely, notifying the hours, 1—2—3—4—5, and still the master slept on. "The sleep of a laboring man is sweet," says the Wise King, and if labor of mind as well as of body entitles a man to enjoy the sweet influence "that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care"—then surely Mr. Fields had earned his reward.

He awoke before the servants came down, and went up to his room.

CHAPTER VI.

The household was early astir. The familiar sounds of drawing up blinds and cleaning grates on the ground floor hinted to sleepy wakers above that the unwelcome bell would soon summon them to turn out.

Thomas came down as usual and went to his pantry. But two minutes later he was in the kitchen, where the cook and the maids were busy with preparations for breakfast.

"Vill'ens and his Dinah!" he exclaimed. "I say, just come and have a look at the pantry!"

A chorus of voices mingled in discord: "How scared you look, Thomas! What is it? Thieves? Burglars?"

He led the way to the pantry, followed by the women-folk.

"Well," he said, "what do you see? Nothing partic'lar, eh? That's all you know! A parcel of women! There's a deal of partic'lar, I say—that's just the difference. You females take a squint round and snigger, and think you've seen everything, and all the while there's things under your very noses as would make a man stare!"

"Oh, now, don't be sarcastic, Thomas," said a giggling housemaid. "No doubt you're mighty smart, but I don't see nothing out of the way."

"Don't you then, Maria—well, I do. What do you say, Cook? You ought to have more sense than a set of trumpery maids."

"Well," said the Cook, "I say as you should mind your manners, Thomas. We don't want none of your sauce, you weren't engaged to look after our education."

"Go on, Cook, you're no better than the rest! Well, if you don't see nothing partic'lar, let me show you! What do you think of this?"

The maids stood on tip-toe to peer over the shoulders of the portly Cook. Thomas was holding a horn-handled knife with the saw open.

"Oh, my! That's hurglary all over!"

"And what do you think of this?" continued Thomas, holding up for their inspection a piece of wood with a lock imbedded in it. They looked and groaned, and wondered.

"I s'pose," said Thomas, "it would be askin' too much to expect you to see

without being told that this 'ere lock in this 'ere bit of wood has been sawed out with that there saw from that there plate-cupboard. But, howsomever, notwithstanding, that's about the rights of it. Oh, yes, you see it now, plain as daylight, don't yer?"

"Oh my! That's thieves! That's burglars—no mistake! Is there anything took?"

"H'm, well it aren't likely they'd trouble to do that neat little bit of carpentry without some return," said Thomas, as he threw open the dismantled door of the plate-cupboard.

"Unless my eyes deceive me, I don't see the teapot, or the coffee-pot, or the spoons, or the forks, or the slaver, or the salt-cellars, or the cream-jug, or the sugar-basin. That's a nice little haul, take it all round not bad pay for a night's job!"

"Oh, 'tis a terror!—an horrible tale!—no mistake! There's been burglars, that's sure! Oh my!"

"Not much doubt about it," said Thomas. "I s'pose I'd best go and tell the Doctor."

"Of course you had," said the Cook. "We shan't find the things by standing and gaping at the empty cupboard. Come along Jane, and Maria, and Susan, we must get on with the breakfast, anyhow. Burglars or no burglars, it won't do to be late."

Cook led the retreat—Susan and Jane and Maria followed, and the clavering tongues told how horrified they were at the discovery.

Thomas went off to see the Doctor. Early as it was, Mr. Fields had forestalled the footman, and had given Dr. Porchester an account of the night's experiences. They agreed to say nothing about the basket of plate until after making their investigations.

Thomas was rather surprised as he entered the Doctor's study, to be met with the remark:

"I suppose you have come to tell me the plate was stolen last night."

Thomas was on the point of blurting out, "However do you know that, sir?" but he checked himself, and merely said:

"Yes, sir."

"I will see you about it after breakfast you must do the best you can, it is just prayer-time."

The news had spread through the dormitories before the boys came down. Dawson and Hercules made the most of it. Small boys in the fourth class believed that each of the two heroes had killed a burglar in the night. The glamour of romance had its effect on Hercules. He no longer felt confident that the man he saw scurrying along the passage was Thomas. Such a notion would have shorn the adventure of half its glory.

"He was a chap about his size, is all I can say, but there may be a thousand burglars in England the size of Thomas, so I don't think my evidence would be worth much in court."

While the school breakfast was going on, old John Carey came up to the

house. He noticed his ladder leaning against the wall, and the sight of it puzzled him. He had not been using it over night, so he stopped to scratch his head and wonder how it got there.

Then, when he entered the kitchen and was received with a volley of female excitement, he put two and two together and drew his own conclusions.

"The chap as did it," he said, "must have got in at some window by my ladder, it's a-leaning against the wall out yonder. That's as plain as my old woman."

Cook and Susan asked him to show them where it was.

"There's no window within reach," said Cook.

In fact, the ladder was leaning against a blank wall, the top being three feet from the gutter. John Carey was not to be gainsaid. He had uttered his oracle, and he was bound to see it through.

"That don't make no difference," he said. "Burgling chaps can do a power of things as would make me and you look foolish. Why, they'd think nothing of skipping up that there ladder in a brace of shakes and standing on the top bar. Then they'd catch hold of the gutter, and be on it in three winks, and work along to the end where it meets that ledge, and then along to the window round the corner. That's how he did it, anyhow, you may take my word for it."

Cook looked doubtful, but Susan, whose horror of burglars invested them with super-human strength and agility, said she would go up and see if the window was unbolted.

She went, and what she saw made her hesitate whether to scream, or faint, or turn on hysterics. But she compromised matters by calling down the stairs:

"Oh, Cook, 'tis awful! Come and see for yerself."

Cook and Carey hurried up and saw the incriminating evidence.

"Aye," said Carey, "there, just as I told you; there's the pane of glass took out by a professional; puffy, scraped away as neat as you could wish, window unbolted, and thrown open. There's the jummy as the bloke forgot, just as you read it in the perlice news. Oh, he was a sharp 'un, I can tell yer! Knew the trick backwards, he did, that's hevident, just as I knew he done it."

Cook was amazed, and her unbelief was changed to conviction.

"There! I never could have himagine! it, John. Why, one would think you must have been a burgler yourself, to know all about it?"

"Just as I told you," said old John, ignoring the base insinuation.

They told Thomas of the discovery, and Thomas informed the Doctor, who knew about the window already from Mr. Fields. The two masters went and looked at the ladder. They listened to John Carey's explanation of the burglar's tactics. They recognized the impossibility of the feat, but kept their own counsel. And when the inspection was concluded

the two masters adjourned to Dr. Porchester's study.

"What do you think of it, Fields?" asked the Doctor.

"There seem to be two alternatives," was the reply. "Either Thomas was in league with some one outside, and did all the indoor evidence by way of a blind, or else a burglar actually entered the house by the window upstairs, sawed out the lock, packed the basket, placed it within easy reach from the window, and escaped the way he came. I cannot help inclining towards the first alternative. I went to Thomas' room soon after, and his snores were rather too good to be genuine."

"I don't pay much regard to Legg's thinking," he recognized Thomas, said the Doctor; "he may be right, but he may be wrong. However, no burglar could possibly have entered that window by the ladder in its present position, that is absolutely certain. Yet if the ladder were brought round the angle of the wall, an active man could easily get up to the ledge by help of the rain-water pipe. He may have intended to remove the ladder altogether, to avert suspicion, but his wounded hand prevented it."

"I do not believe the tools were left about by accident," said Mr. Fields. "Like the snores, it's rather too good to be true. Would any burglar be such an idiot?"

"I cannot say," replied the Doctor. "We read of such things. I do not wish to condemn Thomas without the strongest proof."

In the course of the morning Mr. Fields interviewed Thomas.

"Bad business last night," said the master.

"Yes, sir, all that plate gone. 'Tis a rascally job!"

"Do you always snore when you're asleep, Thomas?"

"Me, sir? I don't know. I never stay awake to listen. Why do you ask, sir?"

"Last night, soon after the plate vanished, you were snoring wide-awake, weren't you?"

Thomas stared, and looked surprised, and the master thought he detected a perceptible falter in the voice that said, "Was I, sir?"

"Well, I happened to be outside your room. I think it must have been just after you went back to it, curious coincidence, but odd things do happen."

Thomas' face was a study. It may have been merely the natural shrinking from unjust suspicion which blanched his cheeks, or it may have been a consciousness of guilt detected. Mr. Fields could not decide which. Presently Thomas said,

"I can't make out what you be driving at, sir. Do you think I stole the plate?"

"No, I do not think that, and I need not say what I think. I should be sorry to accuse you falsely of being an accomplice. We have sent for the policeman, and I shall tell him all I know. I hope he will be able to settle the matter."

That was the last shell in Mr. Fields' battery, and he fixed his eyes on Thomas' face to watch the effect. Thomas met him with a stony stare, and that was the end of the interview. Mr. Fields walked off to his classroom.

The policeman came in the course of the morning. He was taken into confidence about the plate basket, and then made his observations, with deliberate minuteness, under the escort of Mr. Fields. He asked questions, and entered notes in a leather-covered pocket-book, holding the pencil between thumb and two fingers stretched to their full length, while the other two fingers played out like the crippled wing of a gull, as Mr. Fields remarked afterwards, when showing Browser how not to hold his pencil.

The policeman could not stomach in throwing much light upon the subject. He said that three men of suspicious character had been in the village some time, and had left early that morning. A conveyance drawn by a grey horse had taken them, and they had lost no time in packing their property, and had driven off. The policeman said it looked suspicious, and he would communicate with the inspector.

"The would-be robber must have a bruise on his hand," said Mr. Fields; and the policeman made an extra note of the fact.

In the half-hour before dinner Mr. Fields brought down the basket of plate Thomas was amazed when he saw it; but he made no remark.

As before stated, the mystery was not cleared up. A week later those three men were taken open-handed in committing a burglary at Dorchester. The Deepwell's policeman had instructed the inspector, and the hands of all three prisoners were examined; but as no trace of a bruise was discoverable on any of the six hands, proof positive was supplied that none of the three men was the midnight marauder at Highfield House.

In the course of the magistrate's trial, the visit to Deepwells was brought up, and the landlord of the "Bird in Hand" was subpoenaed to give evidence. The disturbance was mentioned, and so the matter of Punchey Brown's bet was incidentally divulged.

Mr. Fields had a suspicion that Punchey might have been in league with his son, and had hoped to settle his debt by passing on the plate to the man to whom he owed money. But, if so, Punchey must have employed an agent, for he came up to the house a few days after the excitement, and there was no bridge to be seen on either of his hands.

So things soon settled down, and curiosity gradually subsided. Mother Scrubhard had a bad attack of rheumatism, which confined her to her cottage for seven weeks. Miss Porchester used to take her broth and jellies. A charwoman from the village took her place for week-end clearings at Highfield House, and she continued to hold office even after Mother Scrubhard recovered. The latter told Miss Porchester that her hands were

so crippled with rheumatism that she could not hold a scrubbing-brush.

I do not know whether Mr. Fields gave a thought to his knuckleduster when he heard this announcement, and the suggested suspicion was not openly floated. Perhaps his conscience shrank from the charge of having inflicted bodily hurt upon a woman.

He had his little joke out of the incident at a Latin prose lesson with the second class. He always seemed to relish that lesson more than any other.

"Now, then, Dawson, do the sentence," Caesar demanded hostages from the Lingones."

Dawson began glibly enough: "Caesar" followed by a long pause, with no prospect of further procedure.

"Go on! Say something anything is better than nothing. Caesar, seize her, tease her, squeeze her! Or! here's a sentence that may possibly interest you more. No. 7. The geese, sacred to Juno, preserved the capitol."

"That's just like my sea-gulls, sir," said Harry.

"Good! They woke up Titus Manlius to do great things at Rome. I wish the seagulls would wake up Harry Dawson to do great things at Latin prose!"

CHAPTER VII.

The Festival of St. Thomas had passed. The earth had turned in her sleep once more towards the sun, and a daily dole of extra light was paid from the treasury of the lord of the mountains heritage. The cold strengthened as the days lengthened, but the happy prospect of spring was in the near future, and all things were beginning to grow glad.

A long spell of skating at the beginning of term helped the cold days to speed their flight. Rosy cheeks and laughing eyes were seen on the pond in every period of playtime. Hockey on the ice, and "touch-last," and extemporized sleighs roped along by runners who could not skate, provided exercise and recreation for all.

The two gulls seemed to catch a spirit of exhilaration from the lively scenes enacted on their frozen realm. They kept their feet warm by untiring exercise, striving earnestly to perfect flight, "perpetuated assuredly by faith and hope," as the Doctor said one Sunday in his sermon.

So January gave place to February, frost to thaw. Rains fell, and dikes were filled. Then blustering Boreas sounded the advent of March. Coming in like a lion, March went out like a lamb, with a kiss to April, the sweet-smiling month of Venus, bidding her to mingle showers and sunbeams and to open the lovely buds.

All through the changeful days of that Easter Term the gulls persevered in their flight-drill. Most of Harry Dawson's pocket-money found its way into the fisherman's scaly hand, and the gulls thrived on the generous diet.

One cloudless evening towards the end of April, when the long glories of the westering sun lingered upon the landscape, Dr. Forchester met Harry on his way to the pond to call the gulls in.

"I have been watching them lately," said the Doctor. "Their wings seem in great measure to have regained the long-lost art. I believe they will succeed, Harry. What fervent purpose! what path of perseverance! They have slowed! What a lesson they teach to you and me! There they are, are seen!"

Even as the Doctor spoke, as though his words brought to the birds a final touch of inspiration, they took a short run, and with wings outspread they glided through the air, soon disappearing before they alighted.

"They have got back the power!" said the Doctor.

"Oh, sir, they really did fly!" said Harry. A moment's pause, and the gulls rose in the air once more, not timidly, but with bold assurance. The parting sun-glow shone roseated upon their white wings as they flew in a great circle round the pond. Then, rising in a spiral ascent, glorious, strong, and free even as their brother had done just a year before, they headed straight for the south, athwart the glowing haze.

"They have their reward!" said the Doctor. "Farewell! We use ourselves in light!"

"Oh, sir, isn't it splendid! I can't wish them to come back!"

"No, my boy. You have helped them to achieve the highest good, and you must rejoice with them. You have done a good work, Harry, and the Wise King has said, "Glorious is the fruit of good works." I no longer regret having bought the gulls. They have taught us a grand lesson. May we strive, as they strove, to reach the full vigour of the highest life! God's intention has been fulfilled in them, despite the spilling interference of man. May the same be said of you and me!"

"Is that the way to the sea, sir?" asked Harry.

"Yes, Rocksands lies yonder."

"We are going there next holidays, sir. Perhaps I shall see them."

They walked back to the house in silence, but Harry had recovered the use of his tongue at tea, when he described the scene.

The holidays came, and Harry went for the last week to Rocksands, with his mother and sister. He had grown out of the age when rearing moated castles and channelling the courses of real rivers from rocky pools afford the height of happiness. But he could enjoy boating, and fishing, and long tramps by the shore of the loud-roaring sea.

He always looked with sympathetic affection at the gulls and wondered if his own were among them.

The days went swiftly by. Old Father Time has such an aggravating habit of hurrying up the clock in the holidays! So the last day of the Dawson visit to Rocksands arrived. Harry was anxious

to make the most of it. He had made many long tramps along the beach, but he had never reached the extreme point of Stormbrow Head, which bounded the spacious bay on the west. His ambition was excited to reach that furthestmost point and see what was to be seen on the other side.

So, when breakfast was finished, he stuffed his pockets with sandwiches and buns, and started off. It took him two hours' hard walking to reach the point. The difficulties of the march increased as he approached the goal. The shore was strewn with a vast confusion of gigantic boulders flung down by Titanic forces to guard the base of Stormbrow Head.

Springing across chasms, clambering up rocks, and sliding down slabs slippery with seaweed, was a labour that sorely taxed the muscles of his legs. And when at last he had actually turned the point, and had viewed the coveted prospect from the top of a commanding rock, he was glad enough to climb down and fling himself full length upon a soft, sandy recess.

But he would not waste the precious moments in indolent ease. As soon as the pleasant aching sensation had gone out of his calves, he sat up and tried to grasp the grandeur of the scene.

It was a glorious, breezy, seaside day. Great white masses of cloud were scouring across the infinite blue. The vigour of the southwest wind (called by Horace the lord paramount of the Adriatic) blowing strong and free, sent the sea on with a proud and gallant progress. It flicked up the horses of Neptune, and made them toss their manes and fling the spume from their foam-flecked jaws. They curvetted, and ambled, and pranced, and broke into a mad gallop. It was grand to watch the scuffles of bubbling turmoil, the whirlpools of holling surf, rinsing spray, and wreathing drift, flurry of froth, and flowing coils of curdled snow.

Harry watched it all from that sunny slope of sand, in his nook from the fragments of monstrous rock. Then, for a few minutes, the sun was darkened, and a passing shower sent him under the friendly shelter of the nearest rock. The shower passed, the sun shone forth again in all its splendor, and in a moment the wet rocks "put on the armor of light," so dazzling that he was forced to shut his eyes.

Then he went on further to an open stretch of sand, where the waves came pounding in, with no barricading rocks to break their strength. It was a variation in the magnificence of the display. Harry felt that he could not have too much of it, and please, my reader, try to feel the same.

The waves made towards the shore in moving mountain ranges, ever changing their outline, crumpled and streaked with marbled veins, rising till the sun shone through their transparent ridges with the sheen of emerald and aquamarine. Then, a moment's hesitation of unstable equilibrium, the toppling over, the plunge, the

great catastrophe, the tremendous roar, the cataracts of foam, the rush of the sweeping floods up the sands, the curdling surf, the retreat of the waters hurrying back to be caught in the vortex and swallowed in the boisterous commotion of the succeeding waves.

Harry saw it all. He could not analyze his sensations, but his soul thrilled with the consciousness of irresistible majesty and might.

And then he knew that he was hungry, and must think of getting back. He retraced his steps to that sandy nook, and pulled out his bags of sandwiches and buns. He laid out his provisions on a table of unhewn rock, and as he rummaged in his pockets he felt something hard. He hoped it was a stick of chocolate.

No; it was the old wooden whistle, which had been slumbering there forgotten. He took it out and looked at it with a smile. It brought back memories of the past term. He had not used it since that evening when the gulls flew away. There were gulls on the cliffs towering up behind him; there was a little fleet of gulls out at sea before him. He could see them rollicking up the wave-mountains and sinking into their valleys. He wondered if his gulls were among them.

For auld lang syne he put the whistle to his lips, and blew a long, fluttering, fluty blast, and he listened to the echoes playing hide-and-seek among the cliffs.

And then! Could it be true? Well, when Harry returned to the school and gave us a history of that expedition to Stormbrow Head, and told us what followed after he had blown the whistle, we thought he was indulging his taste for romance. But experience teaches, as copy-books told us in former days, and the proof ought not to be withheld, that what he told us was fact, and not fancy.

One day, about twenty years after that Easter holidays, a tourist was walking along the bay in the island of St. Mary (Selly Isles). He saw an old woman with a basket picking up whelks. She paused a moment in her occupation, and uttered a shrill call. Then, from far out at sea, the sea-gulls rose and flew high towards her. They circled round her, high overhead, and looked down, uttering their happy, laughing notes. Then they alighted at the old woman's feet, and one of them balanced itself on the broad handle of her basket, and she fed them out of her hand.

The tourist looked on amazed. It was a wonderful sight! He did not like to approach for fear of alarming the birds. He waited until they had finished their meal and had thanked their benefactress in their wild gull language, and had flown off again over the sea. Then the tourist went up to the old woman and asked her how such a thing was possible? She said that she had brought those gulls up from the nest, and had treated them kindly, and they would always come when she called them.

I was that tourist, and I have not garbled the simple fact. It was one of the least expected and most interesting

entertainments I ever witnessed. And it brought the conviction that Harry Dawson recounted true history when he told us what followed on his blowing that blast with the whistle.

His eyes were upon that fleet of sea-gulls; he saw them sink into a wave valley, and before they came into sight again, a flapping of wings was discernible, and two of the gulls separated from the rest and flew over the waves. Harry's heart gave a great bounce, and he blew another long note. The two gulls wheeled in a circle over his head, and again he blew the whistle. Then they narrowed the circle into a descending spiral, until they alighted on the sand, and walked about, looking at him.

"I nearly died of delight," were Harry's words.

He took up a couple of sandwiches and picked out the ham and threw it to the gulls. They gulped it down, mustard and all, and they came closer and chuckled. Harry gave them the meat from all the sandwiches, and they gobbled it all down.

They waited about while he ate the bread. He fed them with bits of bun, but they said "Thank you," they had had enough.

The other gulls were flying round with wailing cries, making a great clamor, as if asking the precocious pair what they meant by such intimacy with a human boy. And the pair answered in gull-language. They seemed to thank Harry, and say how glad they were to see him again, and sorry they could not stay longer. Then they flapped, and rose on their strong wings, and joined their companions, and called a final "Good-bye," and flew right away, and Harry saw them no more.

It might have been the tingle of the salt in the wind that made Harry's eyes water as he walked back.

After tea he wrote a long letter to Mr. Fields, and the next day the Dawson family left Rocksands, and went home.

(The End.)

