

HAROLD AVERY

SOLDIERS OF
THE QUEEN

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Soldiers of the Queen

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CHAPTER I.

TIN SOLDIERS

"They shouldered arms, and looked straight before them, and wore a splendid uniform, red and blue." – *The Brave Tin Soldier*.

The battle was nearly over. Gallant tin soldiers of the line lay where they had fallen; nearly the whole of a shilling box of light cavalry had paid the penalty of rashly exposing themselves in a compact body to the enemy's fire; while a rickety little field-gun, with bright red wheels, lay overturned on two infantry men, who, even in death, held their muskets firmly to their shoulders, like the grim old "die-hards" that they were. The brigade of guards, a dozen red-coated veterans of solid lead, who had taken up a strong position in the cover of a cardboard box, still held their ground with a desperate valour only equalled by the dogged pluck of a similar body of the enemy, who had occupied the inkstand with the evident intention of remaining there until the last cartridge had been expended.

Another volley swept the intervening stretch of tablecloth, and the deadly missiles glanced against the glass bottles and rattled among the pencils and penholders. Two men fell without a cry, and lay motionless with their heads resting on the pen-wiper.

"Look here, Barbara, you're cheating! You put in more than two peas that time, I know."

It was the commander-in-chief of the invading forces who spoke, and the words were addressed to a very harum-scarum looking young lady, who stood facing him on the opposite side of the table.

"How d'you know I did?" she cried.

"Because I saw them hit. There were three at least, and the rule was that we weren't to fire more than two at a time."

"There weren't three, then," retorted the girl, laughing, and shaking back her tangled locks with an impatient movement of her head. "There were *six*! Ha! ha! I put them all in my mouth at once, and you never noticed."

"Oh, you little cheat!" cried the boy. "I'll lick you."

The threat had evidently no terrors for her. She danced wildly round the table, crying, "Six! six! six!" and when at length he caught her, and held her by the waist, she turned round and rapped him smartly on the head with a tin pea-shooter.

At this stage of the proceedings a lady, who had been sitting in a low chair by the fire, looked up from her book.

"Come, come!" she said pleasantly. "I thought the day was past when generals fought single combats in front of their men. Isn't that true, Valentine?"

The tussle ceased at once; the boy released his sister, who laughed, and shook herself like a small kitten.

"She's been cheating!" he exclaimed.

"I fired six peas instead of two!" cried the culprit, evidently delighted with her little piece of wickedness. "And I knocked over two of his silly old soldiers."

A girl, somewhat older than Valentine, though very like him in face, laid down her needlework, saying, with a quiet smile, —

"All's fair in love and war, isn't it, Barbara?"

"Yes, of course it is," answered her sister.

"It's not – is it, aunt?" retorted the boy.

The lady rose from her chair, and, with a merry twinkle in her eye, came over to the table.

"Well, we'll hope not," she said. "Why, Val, I should have thought you were too old to play with tin soldiers; you were fourteen last birthday."

"I don't think I shall ever be tired of playing with them – that is," he added, "until I'm with real ones."

"Queen Mab," as the children sometimes called her, was below the medium height, and as she stood by her nephew's side his head reached above the level of her shoulder. She glanced over the mimic battlefield, and then down at the bright, healthy-looking young face at her side, with its honest grey eyes and resolute little mouth and chin. The old words, "food for powder," came into her mind, and she laid her hand lightly on his rumpled hair.

"So you still mean to be a soldier?"

"Yes, rather; and father says I may."

Miss Fenleigh was silent for a moment. "Ah, well," she said at length, "a happy time will come some day when there will be no more war; and I think it's about time this one ceased, for Jane will be here in a minute to clear the table for tea."

If Valentine or either of his sisters had been asked to describe their Aunt Mabel, they would probably have done so by saying she was the best and dearest person in the world; and accepting this assertion as correct, it would be difficult to say more. Her house also was one of the most delightful places which could well be imagined; and there, since their mother's death, the children spent each year the greater part of their summer holidays.

It was a dear, easy-going old house, with stairs a little out of the straight, and great beams appearing in unexpected places in the bedroom ceilings. There were brass locks with funny little handles to the doors, and queer alcoves and cupboards let into the walls. There was no fusty drawing-room, with blinds always drawn down, and covers to the chairs, but two cosy parlours meant for everyday use, the larger of which was panelled with dark wood which reflected the lamp and firelight, and somehow seemed to be ready to whisper to one stories of the days when wood was used for wall-paper, and when houses were built with sliding panels in the walls and hiding-places in the chimneys. The garden exactly matched the house, and so did the flowers that grew in it – the pink daisies, "boy's love," sweet-williams, and hollyhocks, all of which might be picked as well as looked at. Visitors never had a chance of stealing the fruit, because they were always invited to eat it as soon as it was ripe, or even before, if they preferred.

There were a lawn, and a paddock, and a shrubbery, the last so much overgrown that it resembled a little forest, and often did duty for a miniature "merry Sherwood," when the present of some bows and arrows caused playing at Robin Hood and his men to become a popular pastime. Lastly, there was the stable, where Jessamine, the little fat pony, and the low basket-carriage were lodged; and above was the loft, a charming place, which had been in turn a ship, a fortress, a robbers' cave, and a desert island. Up there were loads of hay and bundles of straw, which could be built up or rolled about in; the place was always in a romantic twilight; there were old, deserted spiders' webs hanging to the roof, looking like shops to let, which never did any business; and the ascent and descent of the perpendicular ladder from the ground floor was quite an adventure in itself. To picture a ship on which one had to go aloft to enter the cabin would seem rather a difficult task; but a child's imagination is the richest in the world, and though Valentine and his sisters had grown rather too old for this style of amusement, every fresh visit to Brenlands was made brighter by recollections of the many happy ones which had preceded it, and of all the fun and frolic they had already enjoyed there.

But best and foremost of all the charming things which made the place so bright and attractive was Queen Mab herself. She never said that little people ought to be seen and not heard; and there never was a person so easy to tell one's troubles to, or so hard to keep a secret from, as Aunt Mabel. No one in the world could ever have told stories as well as she did. "The Brave Tin Soldier" and "The Ugly Duckling" were the favourites, and came in time to be always associated with Brenlands.

They had been told so often that the listeners always knew exactly what was coming next, and had the narrator put the number of metal brethren at two dozen instead of twenty-five, or missed out a single stage of the duckling's wanderings, she would have been instantly tripped up by her audience. But Queen Mab was too skilful a story-teller to leave out the minutest detail in describing the perilous voyage of the paper boat, or to spare the duckling a single snub from the narrow-minded hen or the bumptious tom-cat. The "Tin Soldier" she generally gave in answer to the special request of her small nephew, but she herself seemed to prefer the other story. There, the duckling's sorrowful wanderings finished with his turning into a swan, and Queen Mab always had a liking for happy endings.

She and the old house were exactly suited to each other, and seemed to share the same fragrant atmosphere, so that wherever her courtiers met her, and flung their arms round her neck, they were instantly reminded of sweet-brier and honeysuckle, jars of dried rose leaves, and all the other delicious scents of Brenlands. The children never noticed that there were streaks of silver in her hair, or that on her left hand she wore a mourning ring; nor did they know the reason why, on a certain day in the year, she seemed, if possible, more kind and loving than on any other, and went away somewhere early in the morning with a big bunch of flowers, and came back with the basket empty.

"Aunt," said Barbara, "what's an old maid?"

"Why, I'm one!" answered Queen Mab, laughing; whereupon it became every one's ambition to live a life of single blessedness. When there was cherry-tart for dinner, an alarming number of stones were secretly swallowed, in order that the person guilty of this abominable piece of sharp practice might count out, "This year – Next year – Some time – Never!" and at old maid's cards the object of the game was now reversed, and instead of trying to "go out," every one strove to remain in, the fortunate being in whose hands the "old maid" remained at the finish always brandishing the hitherto detested card with a shriek of triumph.

The last trace of the mimic battle had been cleared away, and now where tin cavalry had ridden boldly to their fate, and lead guards had died but not surrendered, nothing was to be seen but peaceful plum-cake, or bread and butter cut in thin and appetizing slices.

"I'm sorry you weren't able to make a longer stay," said Aunt Mabel, as she poured out the tea. "But your father said he couldn't spare you for more than a week at Easter. However, the summer will soon be here, and then you will come again for a proper visit. By-the-bye, Valentine, d'you know that your cousin Jack is coming to be a school-fellow of yours at Melchester?"

"No, aunt; is that Uncle Basil's son?"

"Yes; I want you to make friends with him, and bring him over here on your half-term holiday. I hope he will come for a few weeks at midsummer, and then you will all be able to have a jolly time together."

"How old is he?" asked Valentine.

"Oh, I think he is about a year older than you are – fifteen or thereabouts."

Barbara had fished a stranger out of her cup, and was smiting the back of one plump little hand against the other, to the accompaniment of "Monday – Tuesday – Wednesday," and so on.

"Aunt Mab," she said suddenly, "how is it we never hear anything of Uncle Basil, or that he never comes to visit us? What's Jack like?"

"Well, I can hardly tell you," replied Miss Fenleigh; "I've only seen him once, poor boy, and that was several years ago."

"But why don't we ever see Uncle Basil?" persisted Barbara. "You often come and visit us, and why doesn't he?"

"Well, I live within ten miles of your house, and Padbury is thirty or forty miles on the other side of Melchester."

"But that isn't very far by railway; and if he can't come, why doesn't he write?"

Aunt Mabel seemed perplexed what reply to make, but at this moment the boy came to her rescue.

"Don't ask so many questions, Bar," he said.

Miss Barbara was always ready for a tussle, with words or any other weapons. "Pooh!" she answered, "whom d'you think you're talking to? I know what it is, you're angry because I knocked over more of your soldiers than you did of mine!"

"Yes, you cheated."

"Fiddles! You thought I'd only got two peas in my mouth, you old stupid, and instead of that I'd got six, *six!* ha! ha!" And so the discussion continued.

Helen was nearly two years older than Valentine. She was a quiet, thoughtful girl, and later in the evening, when her brother and sister had gone to bed, she remained talking with her aunt in front of the fire. While so doing, she returned to the subject of their conversation at the tea-table.

"Aunt, why is it that father and Uncle Basil never meet?"

"Well, my dear, I didn't like to talk about it before Val and Barbara; it's a pity they should hear the story before they are older and can understand it better; besides, I wish the boys to be good friends when they meet at school. Basil and your father had a dispute many years ago about some money matters connected with your grandfather's will, and I am sorry to say they have never been friends since. Your uncle has always been a very unpractical man; he has wasted his life following up ideas which he thought would bring him success and riches, but which always turned out failures. He always has some fresh fad, and it always brings him fresh trouble. I don't think he would wilfully wrong any one, but from being always in difficulties and under the weather, his temper has been soured and his judgment warped, and he cannot or will not see that your father acted in a perfectly just and honourable manner, and the consequence is, as I said before, they never made up their quarrel."

"And Jack is going to the school at Melchester?"

"Yes; and I want Valentine to make friends with him, and for us to have him here in the summer. Poor boy, soon after your mother died, he lost his, and I am afraid his life and home surroundings have not been very happy since. Well, we must try to brighten him up a bit. I've no doubt we shall be able to do that when we get him here at Brenlands."

CHAPTER II. AN UGLY DUCKLING

"They had not been out of the egg long, and were very saucy. 'Listen, friend,' said one of them to the duckling, 'you are so ugly that we like you very well.'" –
The Ugly Duckling.

It was the first day of term, and Melchester School presented a general appearance of being unpacked and put together again, as though the whole institution had been sent out of town for the holidays, and had returned by goods train late on the previous evening. The passages were strewn with the contents of boxes belonging to late comers; new boys wandered about, apparently searching for something which they never found; while the old stagers exchanged noisy greetings, devoured each other's "grub," and discussed the prospects of the coming thirteen weeks which they must pass together before the commencement of the summer vacation.

Most of the boys had arrived on the Monday evening, but Valentine Fenleigh did not come back until the following morning. According to a promise made to his aunt before leaving Brenlands, one of the first things he did was to inquire after his cousin.

"Yes," said one of his classmates, "there is a new chap by the name of Fenleigh, but I don't know what he's like. He's not put with us in the Lower Fourth."

Among a hundred and fifty boys, and in the confusion of a first day, it was a difficult matter to discover at once the whereabouts of the fellow he wanted. He accosted one or two of the newcomers, but by the time the bell rang for afternoon school he had only succeeded in ascertaining the fact that his cousin must be somewhere about, from having seen the name "J. Fenleigh" ticked off on the bedroom list. Holms was full of a project for hiring a bicycle during the summer months, and, what with listening to the unfolding of this plan, and struggling with the work in hand, Valentine soon forgot the existence of his undiscovered relative.

Towards the end of the first hour Mr. Copland, the form-master, folded up a piece of paper on which he had been writing, and handing it across the desk, said, —

"Fenleigh, take this in to Mr. Rowlands, and bring back an answer."

Valentine made his way to the head-quarters of the Upper Fourth. The classroom was rather quieter than the one he had left, Mr. Rowlands being somewhat of a martinet.

"All right," said the latter, who was copying a list of questions on the blackboard; "put your note on my table, and I'll attend to you in a moment."

The messenger did as he was told, and stood looking round the room, exchanging nods and winks with one or two members of the upper division with whom he was on friendly terms.

On a form at the back of the room sat three boys who were hardly ever seen apart, and who had apparently formed an alliance for the purpose of idling their time, and mutually assisting one another in getting into scrapes. Their names were Garston, Rosher, and Teal; and seated at the same desk was a boy with whom they seemed to have already struck up an acquaintance, though Valentine did not remember having seen his face before. Even in the Upper Fourth there was a subdued shuffle, showing that work was going rather hard on this first day; and the young gentlemen whose names have just been mentioned were evidently not throwing themselves heart and soul into the subject which was supposed to be occupying their undivided attention.

Mr. Rowlands finished a line, made a full stop with a sharp rap of his chalk, and then turned round sniffing.

"Dear me!" he said, "there's a strong smell of something burning."

"Perhaps it's Jackson's cricket cap," murmured a small boy. Jackson's hair, be it said, was of a fiery red, and hence the suggestion that his head-gear might be smouldering in his pocket.

"What's that?" demanded Mr. Rowlands, and the joker subsided.

Jackson waited until a fresh sentence had been begun on the blackboard; then he dropped a ruler, and in picking it up again smote the small boy on a vulnerable spot beneath the peak of his shell-jacket.

"There *is* something burning," repeated the master. "Has any one of you boys got matches in his pocket?"

"Oh, *no*, sir!" shouted a dozen voices.

"Answer more quietly, can't you? I'm not deaf! Jackson, see if there's anything in the stove."

The stove was found to contain nothing but a bit of ink-sodden blotting-paper. Jackson drew it carefully forth, and held it up between his finger and thumb. "That's all, sir," he said.

"Then put it *back*, sir," cried the master, "and go on with your work."

Valentine had some difficulty in keeping from laughing. The smell which had greeted Mr. Rowlands' nostrils was caused by Garston, who was deliberately burning holes with a magnifying glass in the coat of the boy in front of him, who sat all unconscious of what was happening to this portion of his wardrobe.

The new fellow, who watched the proceedings with great interest, now stretched out his hand, and taking the glass held it up level with the victim's neck.

A moment later there was a yell.

"Who made that noise?"

"Please, sir, somebody burnt my neck!"

"Burnt your neck! What boy has been burning Pilson's neck?"

The new-comer raised his hand and gave a flip with his thumb and finger. "I did," he answered.

"You did!" exclaimed Mr. Rowlands wrathfully. "What are you thinking of, sir? I've spoken to you four times to-day already. I don't know if you were accustomed to behave in this manner at the last school you were at, but let me tell you –"

"Please, sir," interrupted Pilson plaintively, "they've burnt a hole in my back!"

At this announcement the class exploded.

"*Silence!*" cried the master. "What do you mean, Pilson? is your coat burnt?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, Fenleigh; I shall give you five hundred lines."

Valentine, who had been an unoffending spectator of the affair, was fairly staggered at suddenly hearing himself commissioned to write five hundred lines. Then the situation dawned upon him – this reckless gentleman with the burning-glass was his cousin Jack.

Mr. Rowlands made a memorandum of the punishment, and at the same time scribbled a few words in reply to Mr. Copland. As he did so, Valentine had an opportunity of examining his relative's appearance. The latter might have been pronounced good-looking, had it not been for a perpetual expression of restlessness and discontent, which soured what would otherwise have been a pleasant face. He seemed to care very little for the lines, and as soon as the master's eye was off him he turned to Garston and winked.

Valentine was by no means what is commonly known as a "good boy;" he was as fond of a lark as any right-minded youngster need be; but he had been taught at home that any one who intended to become a soldier should first learn to obey, and to respect the authority of those set over him. He did not like plunging into rows for the sake of being disorderly; and something in Jack Fenleigh's careless behaviour did not tend to leave on his mind a very favourable impression of his newly-found cousin. He had, however, promised Queen Mab to make friends; and so, as soon as afternoon school was over, he waited for Jack in the gravel playground, and there introduced himself.

"Oh, so you're Valentine," said the other. "My guv'nor told me you were here."

"Yes. I hope we shall be friends."

"Well, there's no reason why we shouldn't. My gov'nor's had a row with yours, I know; but that's nothing, he's always quarrelling with somebody, and I'm sure I don't mind, if you don't. By-the-bye, weren't you the fellow who was in the classroom when I got into that row about the burning-glass?"

"Yes; and I say it's rather a pity you go on like that the first day you're here. Masters don't expect new fellows to begin larking at once, and you'll get into Rowlands' bad books."

"Oh, I don't mind that," answered the other; "I didn't want to come here, and I don't care if I'm sent going again."

At this moment Garston joined them.

"Hallo!" he said, "are you two related to each other? I never thought of your names being the same before. Cousins, eh? Well, look here, new Fenleigh, Pilson's on the war-path after you for burning his neck."

"I don't care if he is," answered the other.

Hardly had the words been spoken when the subject of them turned the corner.

"Yes," he cried, "you're the chap I'm after! What did you burn my coat for?"

"I didn't burn your coat."

"Oh, you liar! Look here, I'm just going to –"

What Pilson *was* going to do will remain for ever unknown. He had no sooner laid his hand on Jack's collar than the latter, without a moment's hesitation, struck him a heavy blow on the chest which sent him staggering back against the wall gasping for breath.

"Just keep your dirty paws off me. I tell you I didn't burn your coat; though to look at it, I should think burning's about all it's good for."

This was not at all the usual line of conduct which new boys adopted when brought to book by an oldster. Pilson felt aggrieved, but made no attempt to follow up his attack.

"All right," he said. "You're a liar, and I'll tell all the other fellows."

"You can tell 'em what you please," returned the other, and taking hold of Garston's arm he walked away.

Valentine turned on his heel with a doubtful look on his face; his cousin evidently knew how to take care of himself, yet the latter's conduct was not altogether satisfactory. It was Garston who had burnt the coat, and it was like him to let another boy bear the blame; while Jack evidently cared as little for being thought a liar as he did for any other misfortune that might befall him.

During the next few days the cousins met every now and again in the playground, or about the school buildings, but it was only to exchange a nod or a few words on some subject of general interest. There seemed to be little in common between them; and Jack, though willing enough to be friendly and forget the family feud, evidently found the society of the three unruly members of the Upper Fourth more to his liking than that of a steady-going boy like Valentine.

For nearly a month the latter did his best to form the friendship which his aunt had desired; then an event happened which caused him to almost regard the task as hopeless. Jack had been steadily winning for himself the reputation of a black sheep; but the climax was reached when he further distinguished himself in connection with certain extraordinary proceedings known and remembered long afterwards as the "Long Dormitory Sports."

It was Rosher's idea. The chamber in question was called "Long" from the fact that it contained sixteen beds, eight on a side, all of which were occupied by members of the Upper Fourth. Skeat, the Sixth Form boy in charge, was ill, and had gone to the infirmary; and in the absence of the proverbial cat, the mice determined to get in as much play as possible, only stopping short at performances which might attract the attention of the master on duty.

It was one Tuesday night. Garston and Teal had had a quarter mile walking race up and down the centre aisle, which had ended, to the great delight of the spectators, in Garston nearly tearing his nightshirt off his back by catching it on a broken bedstead, while the other competitor had kicked his

toe against an iron dumb-bell, and finished the race by dancing a one-legged hornpipe in the middle of the course, while his opponent won "hands down."

"I say," remarked Rosher, "why shouldn't we have proper sports, with a proper list of events and prizes?"

"Who'll give the prizes?" asked Teal.

"Oh, anybody! Look here. I vote we have sports to-morrow night before old Skeat comes back. Hands up, those who are agreeable! To the contrary! – none. Very well, it's carried!"

"But how about prizes?" persisted Teal, who was of rather a mercenary disposition.

"There needn't be any proper prizes," answered Rosher; "we can give the winners anything."

"Give 'em lines," suggested Garston.

"No; shut up, Garston. Everybody must give something. I'll offer a brass match-box, shaped like a pig."

"No, you won't," interrupted Teal. "It's mine; you borrowed it a week ago, and never gave it me back."

"Did I? Well, I'll tell you what, I'll offer a photograph of my brother; the frame's worth something. Now, what'll you give, Garston?"

Garston offered a small pocket-mirror. Jack Fenleigh a bone collar-stud, while a boy named Hamond promised what was vaguely described as "part of a musical box," and which afterwards turned out to be the small revolving barrel, the only fragment of the instrument which remained.

Prizes having been secured, the next thing was to arrange competitions in which to win them; and in doing this, the committee were obliged to keep in view the peculiar nature and limitations of the ground at their disposal. It was no good Hamond's clamouring for a pole jump, or Teal suggesting putting the weight. Jack's proposal of a sack race in bolster cases was, for a moment, entertained as a good idea; then it was suddenly remembered that the bolsters had no cases, and so that project fell through.

One by one the events were decided on. Rosher promised to draw up a programme, and insisted that after every boy's name some distinguishing colours should appear, as on a proper sports list, and that competitors were to arrange their costumes accordingly.

"When shall it come off?" asked Garston.

"Oh, to-morrow, after the masters have all gone in to supper. Now, we've been planning long enough; good-night."

The occupants of the Long Dormitory, be it said to their credit, were not fellows to form a scheme and then think no more about it, and the next day their minds were exercised with preparations for the sports, the chief difficulty being in arranging costumes which should answer to the descriptions given on Rosher's card. These vagaries in dress caused an immense amount of amusement, and when the masters' supper-bell gave the signal for the commencement of operations, every one found it difficult to retrain from shouts of laughter at the sight of the various styles of war-paint. Perhaps that of Jack Fenleigh, though simple to a degree, was most comical: his colours were described as "red and white," and his costume consisted of his night-shirt, and a large scarlet chest-protector which he had borrowed from a small boy, whose mother fondly believed him to be wearing it according to her instructions, instead of utilizing it to line a box containing a collection of birds' eggs.

As every race had to be run in a number of heats the events were necessarily few in number. There were a hopping race, a hurdle race over the beds, and a race in which the competitors were blindfolded, and each carried a mug full of water, which had not to be spilt by the way.

Teal, over whose bed, as the result of a collision, two boys happened to empty the contents of their half-pint cups, professed not to see much fun in the performance, though every one else voted it simply screaming.

But the contest looked forward to with the greatest amount of interest was the obstacle race. It was placed at the end of the programme; Garston's pocket-mirror, the only prize worth having, was to reward the winner; and the conditions were as follows: —

The runners were to go once round the room, alternately crawling under and hopping over the sixteen beds; the finish was to be down the middle aisle, across the centre of which a row of chairs was placed, on which boys stood or sat to keep them steady while the racers crawled under the seats. In spite of the fact that the pocket-mirror was to be the prize, only Jack and Hamond appeared at the starting-point when it came to this last item on Rosher's programme, their companions voting it too much fag, and preferring to sit on the obstacles and look on.

The signal was given, and the two competitors started off in grand style, plunging in and out among the beds like dolphins in a choppy sea. Jack led from the first; he dashed up to the row of chairs a long way in front of Hamond, and had wriggled the greater portion of his body through the bars, when —

No one could have said exactly how the alarm was given, or who first saw the gleam of light through the ground-glass ventilator. The obstacle was snatched from the centre of the room; with a rush and a bound everybody was in bed; a moment later Mr. Rowlands entered the room, the first thing which met his gaze being the extraordinary spectacle of Jack Fenleigh, who, like a new kind of snail, was crawling along the floor on his hands and knees with a cane-bottomed chair fixed firmly on the centre of his back. The weight of the boy sitting on it being removed, the unfortunate Jack found it impossible to force his way any further, and thus remained unable to extricate himself from between the bars of the obstacle.

"Fenleigh," said the master, "get up off the ground. What are you doing, sir?"

The boy struggled to his feet, and in doing so revealed the glories of the chest-protector. There was a subdued titter from the adjacent beds.

"Silence!" cried Mr. Rowlands. "So you're responsible for this noise and disorder, Fenleigh? If you want to perform as a clown, you had better leave school and join a circus. At nine o'clock to-morrow you will come with me to the headmaster's study."

By breakfast-time on the following morning the story of this tragic finish to the obstacle race was all over the school. Valentine heard it, and waited anxiously to learn his cousin's fate. The latter escaped with a severe reprimand, and the loss of the next two half-holiday afternoons; but he was reminded that his conduct, especially for a new boy, had been all along most unsatisfactory, and he was given clearly to understand that any repetition of this constant misbehaviour would result in his being expelled without further warning.

"I wish you'd take more care what you're up to, Jack," said Valentine. "You're bound to get thrown out if you don't behave better."

"What's the odds if I am? I've only been here a month, and I hate the place already."

"It seems to me," answered Valentine sadly, "that you don't care a straw for anything or anybody."

"Well, why should I?" returned the other. "You wouldn't, if you were in my place."

CHAPTER III. THE REBEL RECLAIMED

"I think he will grow up pretty, and perhaps be smaller; he has remained too long in the egg, and therefore his figure is not properly formed;" and then she stroked his neck and smoothed the feathers." – *The Ugly Duckling*.

Towards the end of June, Queen Mab wrote asking the two boys to come over for their usual half-term holiday.

"I'm not going," said Jack.

"Why not?" asked Valentine, astonished that any one should decline an invitation to Brenlands. "Why ever not? You'd have a jolly time; Aunt Mabel's awfully kind."

"I daresay she is, but I never go visiting. I hate all that sort of thing."

It was no good trying to make Jack Fenleigh alter his mind; he stuck to his resolution, and Valentine went to Brenlands alone.

"I'm sorry Jack wouldn't come with you," said Queen Mab on the Saturday evening; "why was it? Aren't you and he on good terms with each other?"

"Oh, yes, aunt, we're friendly enough in one way, but we don't seem able to hit it off very well together."

"How is that?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm not his sort; I suppose I'm too quiet for him."

"I always thought you were noisy enough," answered Miss Fenleigh laughing.

"You wouldn't, if you knew some of our fellows," returned the boy.

The weeks slipped by, the holidays were approaching, and the far-off haven of home could almost, as it were, be seen with the naked eye. Whether the disastrous termination to the dormitory sports had really served as a warning to Jack to put some restraint upon his wayward inclinations, it would be difficult to say; but certainly since the affair of the obstacle race he had managed to keep clear of the headmaster's study, and had only indulged in such minor acts of disorder as were the natural consequences of his friendship with Garston, Rosher, and Teal. It needed the firm hand of Mr. Rowlands to hold in check the sporting element which at this period was, unfortunately, rather strong in the Upper Fourth, and which, at certain times – as for instance during the French lessons – attempted to turn the very highroad to learning into a second playground.

Monsieur Durand, whose duty it was to instil a knowledge of his graceful mother tongue into the minds of a score of restless and unappreciative young Britons, found the facetious gentlemen of the Upper Fourth a decided "handful." They seemed to regard instruction in the Gallic language as an unending source of merriment. Garston threw such an amount of eloquence into the reading of the sentence, "My cousin has lost the hat of the gardener," that every one sighed to think that a relative of one of their classmates should have brought such sorrow on the head of the honest son of toil; and when Teal announced joyfully that "His uncle had found the hat of the gardener," Rosher was obliged to slap the speaker on the back, and say, "Bravo!"

This being M. Durand's first term in an English school, that gentleman could hardly have been expected, as the saying goes, to be up to all the moves on the board; and certain of his pupils, sad to relate, were only too ready to take advantage of his lack of experience. It was discovered that it was comparatively easy to obtain permission to leave the class. "Please, sir, may I go and get a drink of water?" or "Please, sir, may I go and fetch my dictionary?" was sufficient to obtain temporary leave of absence; nor did the French master seem to take much notice as to the length of time which such errands should by right have occupied. The consequence was that not unfrequently towards the end of

the hour a quarter of his pupils were gathered in what was known as the playshed, drinking sherbet, or playing cricket with a fives ball and a walking-stick.

One particular morning, when the Lower Fourth were struggling with the parsing and analysis of a certain portion of Goldsmith's "Deserted Village," a mysterious patch of light appeared dancing about on the wall and ceiling, attracting the attention of the whole class, and causing the boy just told to "go on" to describe "man" as a personal pronoun, and to put a direct object after the verb "to be."

"Fenleigh," said Mr. Copland, "just see who that is outside."

Valentine, who was seated nearest the window, rose from his place, and looking down into the yard beneath saw the incorrigible Jack amusing himself by flashing sunbeams with the pocket-mirror which he had won in the dormitory sports. The latter, who ought by rights to have been transcribing a French exercise, grinned, and promptly bolted round the corner.

"Who was it, Fenleigh?"

Valentine hesitated.

"Who was it? Did you see the boy?"

"Yes, sir; it was my cousin."

"What! J. Fenleigh in the Upper Fourth?"

"Yes, sir."

"Humph! very well," answered Mr. Copland, making a memorandum on a slip of paper in front of him; "I'll seek an interview with that young gentleman after school."

Valentine's heart sank, for he had in his pocket a letter from Queen Mab saying that she was driving over in the pony carriage that very afternoon, and inviting the two boys to spend their half-holiday with her in Melchester. This significant remark of Mr. Copland's meant that Jack would be prevented from going. Valentine felt that he was indirectly the cause of the misfortune, and his wayward relative seemed inclined to view the matter in the same light.

"I say," he exclaimed, "you were a sneak to tell Copland it was I who was flashing that looking-glass."

"I couldn't help it," answered Valentine. "He told me to look out and see who was there."

"Well, why didn't you say the fellow had run away, or something of that sort?"

"Because it would have been a lie."

"Pooh! telling a cram like that to a master doesn't count. You are a muff, Valentine," and the speaker turned on his heel with a contemptuous shrug of his shoulders.

The little fat pony, the low basket-carriage, Jakes the gardener driving, and last and best of all Queen Mab herself, arrived at the time appointed; but only one of her nephews was waiting at the rendezvous.

"Why, where's Jack?"

"He got into a scrape this morning, and is kept in. What's more, he says it's my fault, and we've had a row about it. I don't think we ever shall be friends, aunt."

"Oh, you mustn't say that. In a fortnight's time we shall all be at Brenlands together, and then we must try to rub some of the sharp corners off this perverse young gentleman. I must come back with you to the school and try to see him before I drive home."

In the quiet retirement of Mr. Copland's classroom, Jack was writing lines when a messenger came to inform him that some one wished to see him in the visitors' room.

"Bother it! Aunt Mabel," he said to himself. "I suppose I must go," he added, swishing the ink from his pen and throwing it down on the desk. "What a bore relations are! I wish they'd let me alone."

From their one brief meeting years before, neither aunt nor nephew would have recognized each other now had they met in the streets, and so this was like making a fresh acquaintance. Jack had heard only one half of a very lopsided story, and though he took no interest in the family disagreement, yet he was inclined to be suspicious of his grown-up relations. He marched down the passage, jingling his keys with an air of defiance; but when he entered the visitors' room, and saw the bright smile with

which his aunt greeted his appearance, he dropped the swagger and became stolidly polite. She, for her part, had come prepared for the conquest which she always made; his awkward, boyish manner and uncared-for appearance, the dissatisfied look upon his face, and the ink stains on his collar, all were noticed in one loving glance, and touched her warm heart.

"Well, Jack," she said, "you see Mahomet has come to the mountain. How are you, dear?"

Jack muttered that he was quite well. It was rather embarrassing to be called "dear." He attempted to hide his confusion by wiping his nose; but in producing his handkerchief, he pulled out with it a forked catapult stick and a broken metal pen-holder, which clattered to the ground and had to be picked up again.

"How you've grown!" said Queen Mab, "and – my senses! what muscles you've got," she added, feeling his arm.

Jack grinned and bent his elbow, the next moment he straightened it again.

"Go on!" he said; "you're chaffing me."

"I'm not. I wish you'd been at Brenlands at Easter, and I'd have set you to beat carpets. Never mind, I shall have you with me in a fortnight."

"I don't think I shall come," he began.

"Stuff and nonsense!" interrupted the aunt. "I say you *are* coming. Valentine never makes excuses when I send him an invitation. Don't you think I know how to amuse young people?"

"Oh, yes; it's not that."

"Then what is it?"

"I don't know," answered the boy, grinning, and kicking the leg of the table.

"Of course you don't; so you've got to come. Valentine's sisters will be there; you'd like to meet the two girls?"

"No, I shouldn't."

"Oh, shocking! you rude boy."

Jack stood on one leg and laughed; this was like talking to a fellow in the Upper Fourth, and his tongue was loosed.

"They'd hate me," he said; "I don't know anything about girls."

"I should think you didn't. Wait till you see Helen and Barbara."

"But there's another thing. I haven't got any clothes."

"My dear boy, how dreadful! Whose are those you are wearing now?"

"Oh, go on, aunt; what a chaff you are! I don't mean that – I –"

"No, you evidently don't know what you mean. Well, one thing's settled, you're coming to Brenlands for the summer holidays."

The battle was won, and Queen Mab had gained her usual victory.

"How is your father? Didn't he send me any message?"

"Yes, I think he told me to give you his love."

"Is that all?"

"Well, that's a jolly sight more than what he sends to most people," answered the boy.

He would have been surprised to have seen that there were tears in her eyes when she walked out of the school gates, and still more astonished to know that it was love for his unworthy self which brought them there; for little did Fenleigh J. of the Upper Fourth imagine that any one would come so near to crying on his account.

That evening, just before supper, Valentine felt some one touch him on the shoulder, and turning round saw that it was his cousin.

"I've seen Queen Mab, as you call her," remarked the latter, "and, I say – I like her – rather."

"I knew you would. She's an angel – only jollier."

"She made me promise I'd go there for the holidays."

"Oh, that's fine!" cried Valentine. "I thought she would; she's got such a way of making people do what she wants. I am glad you are going; you'll enjoy it awfully."

Fenleigh J. regarded the speaker for a moment with rather a curious glance. In view of the events of the morning he rather expected that his cousin would not be overpleased to hear that he had been asked to spend the holidays at Brenlands; and that Valentine should rejoice at his having accepted the invitation, struck him as being rather odd.

"Look here, Val," he blurted out, "I'm sorry I called you a sneak this morning. It was my fault, and you're a good sort after all."

"Oh, stop it!" answered the other. "I'll forgive you now that you've promised to go to Brenlands."

Queen Mab was at home, miles away by this time; yet, as a result of her flying visit, some of the softening influence of her presence and kindly usages of her court seemed to linger even amid the rougher and more turbulent atmosphere of Melchester School.

CHAPTER IV. THE COURT OF QUEEN MAB

"They were swans ... the ugly little duckling felt quite a strange sensation as he watched them." – *The Ugly Duckling*.

During the short period which elapsed between Queen Mab's visit and the end of the term Jack managed to steer clear of misfortune; but on the last evening he must needs break out and come to grief again.

He incited the occupants of the Long Dormitory to celebrate the end of work by a grand bolster fight, during the progress of which conflict a pillow was thrown through the ventilator above the door. It so happened that, at that moment, Mr. Copland was walking along the passage; and a cloud of feathers from the torn case, together with fragments of ground glass, being suddenly rained down on his unoffending head, he was naturally led to make inquiries as to the cause of the outrage. As might have been expected, Fenleigh J. was found to be the owner of the pillow which had done the damage, and he was accordingly kept back on the following day to pay the usual penalty of an imposition.

"I'll take your luggage on with me," said Valentine. "You get out at Hornalby, the first station from here, and it's only about a quarter of a mile from there to Brenlands. Any one will tell you the way."

It turned out a wet evening. Queen Mab and her court had already been waiting tea for nearly half an hour, when Valentine exclaimed, "Hallo! here he is!"

The expected guest took apparently no notice of the rain; his cloth cricket cap was perched on the back of his head, and he had not even taken the trouble to turn up the collar of his jacket. He walked up the path in a cautious manner, as though he expected at every step to trip over the wire of a spring-gun; but when he came within a dozen yards of the house he quickened his pace, for Aunt Mabel had opened the door, and was standing ready to give him a welcome.

"Why, boy, how late you are! You must be nearly starving!"

"I couldn't come before," he began; "I had some work to do, and – "

"Yes, you rascal! I've heard all about it. Come in, and Jane shall rub you down with a dry cloth."

Jack left off jingling his keys; he did not like being "rubbed down," but he submitted to the process with great good-humour. It was the cosiest old kitchen; the table was the whitest, and the pots and pans the brightest, that could be imagined; and Jane, the cook, groomed him down as though brushing a damp jacket with a dry glass-cloth was the most enjoyable pastime in life. In the parlour it was just the same: the pretty china cups and saucers, and the little bunches of bright flowers, only made all the nice things there were to eat seem more attractive; and the company were as happy and gay as though it was everybody's birthday, and they had all met to assist one another in keeping up the occasion with a general merry-making. Jack alone was quiet and subdued, for the simple reason that he had never seen anything like it in his life before.

Queen Mab, strongly entrenched at the head of the table, behind the urn, sugar basin, and cream jug, held this line of outworks against any number of flank attacks in the shape of empty cups, the old silver teapot apparently containing an inexhaustible supply of ammunition, and enabling her to send every storming party back to the place from whence it came, and even invite them to attempt another assault.

Once or twice Jack turned to find his aunt watching him with a look in her eyes which caused his own face to reflect the smile which was on hers. She was thinking, and had been ever since she had seen the latest addition to her court coming slowly up the front path through the dismal drizzle, of the old favourite story, and of that part in it where the ugly duckling, overtaken by the storm, arrived

in front of the tumble-down little cottage, which "only remained standing because it could not decide on which side to fall first."

When the meal was over, and while the table was being cleared, Jack wandered out into the porch, and stood watching the rain. He had hardly been there a minute before he was joined by Barbara.

"I say," she exclaimed, "why didn't you talk at tea time? I wanted to ask you heaps of things. Your name's Jack, isn't it? Well, mine's Barbara; they call me Bar, because it's the American for bear, and father says I am a young bear. I want to hear all about that pillow fight, and those races you had in the dormitory."

"Oh, they weren't anything! How did you get to hear about them?"

"Why, Val told us."

"Well, what a fellow he is! He's always talking about the rows I get into."

"It doesn't matter; we thought it awful fun. Helen laughed like anything, and she's very good. I say, can you crack your fingers?"

"No; but I can crack my jaw."

"Oh, do show me!"

Jack really did possess this gruesome accomplishment; he could somehow make a blood-curdling click with his jawbone. When he did it in "prep," his neighbours smote him on the head with dictionaries, and when he repeated the performance in the dormitory, fellows rose in their beds and hurled pillows and execrations into the darkness. Barbara, however, was charmed.

"You are clever!" she cried; "I wish I could do it. Now, come back, and sit by me; we're going to play games."

Jack, who had cherished some vague notion that every girl was something between a saint and a bride-cake ornament, was agreeably surprised at this conversation with his small admirer, and readily complied with her request. Several of the games he had never seen before, but he made bold attempts to play them some way or another, and soon entered into the spirit of his surroundings.

In making words out of words his spelling was nearly as bad as Barbara's, but he seemed to think his own mistakes a great joke, and didn't care a straw how many marks he gave to the other players. In "Bell and Hammer," however, he always managed to buy the "White Horse," while other people would squander their all in bidding for a card which perhaps turned out after all to be only the "Hammer." At "Snap" he was simply terrible; he literally swept the board, but kept passing portions of his winnings under the table to Barbara, whose pile seemed to be as inexhaustible as the widow's cruse. By the end of the evening he was the life of the party, and no one would have believed that he was the same boy who, a few hours ago, had come up the front path wishing in his secret heart that he was safely back at Melchester writing lines in the Upper Fourth classroom.

He and Valentine shared a delightful, old four-post bed, which in times gone by had had the marvellous property of turning itself into a tent, a gipsy van, or a raft, which, though launched from a sinking ship in the very middle of a stormy ocean, always managed to bring its crew of distressed mariners safely to shore in time to answer Queen Mab's cheery call of "Tea's ready!"

"It is nice to be here," said Valentine, dropping his head upon the pillow with a sigh of contentment. "Aren't you glad you came?"

"Yes," answered Jack. "Aunt Mabel seems so jolly kind and glad to see you. I wish you hadn't told her about all those rows I got into; I don't think she'll like me when she knows me better."

"Oh, yes, she will! Don't you like Helen?"

"Yes; I think she has the nicest face I ever saw. But she's too good for me, Val, my boy. I think I shall get on better with Barbara; she's more like a boy, and I don't think I shall ever be a ladies' man."

Valentine laughed; the idea of Fenleigh J. of the Upper Fourth ever becoming a ladies' man was certainly rather comical.

"You'll like Helen when you get to know her. I wouldn't exchange her as a sister for any other girl in the kingdom. Well – good-night!"

That one evening at Brenlands had done more towards forming a friendship between the two boys than all the ninety odd days which they had already spent in each other's company. The next afternoon, however, they were destined to become still more united; and the manner in which this came about was as follows.

During the morning the weather held up, but by dinner time it was raining again.

"Bother it! what shall we do?" cried Valentine.

"I should think you'd better play with your tin soldiers," answered Helen, laughing. "They always seem to keep you good."

Valentine hardly liked this allusion to his miniature army being made in the hearing of his older schoolfellow, for boys at Melchester School were supposed to be above finding amusement in toys of any kind. The latter, however, pricked up his ears, and threw down the book he had been reading.

"Who's got any tin soldiers?" he asked. "Let's see 'em." The boxes were produced. "My eye!" continued Jack, turning out the contents, "what a heap you've got! I should like to set them out and have a battle. And here are two pea-shooters; just the thing!"

"You don't mean to say you're fond of tin soldiers, Jack?" said Aunt Mabel. "Why, you're much too old, I should have thought, for anything of that kind."

"I'm not," answered the boy; "I love tin soldiers, and anything to do with war. Come on, Val, we'll divide the men and have a fight."

The challenge was accepted. There was an empty room upstairs, and on the floor of this the opposing forces were drawn up, and a desperate conflict ensued. The troops were certainly a motley crew; some were running, some marching, and some were standing still; some had their rifles at the "present," and some at the "slope;" but what they lacked in drill and discipline, they made up in their steadiness when under fire, and Jack showed as much skill and resource in handling them as did their rightful commander. He set out his men on some thin pieces of board, which could be moved forward up the room, it having been agreed that he should be allowed to stand and deliver his fire from the spot reached by his advancing line of battle. Each group of these tag-rag-and-bobtail metal warriors was dignified by the name of some famous regiment. Here was the "Black Watch," and there the "Coldstream Guards;" while this assembly of six French Zouaves, a couple of red-coats, a bugler, and a headless mounted officer on a three-legged horse, was the old 57th Foot – the "Die-Hards" – ready to exhibit once more the same stubborn courage and unflinching fortitude as they had displayed at Albuera. Valentine held a position strengthened by redoubts constructed out of dominoes, match-boxes, pocket-knives, and other odds and ends. They were certainly curious fortifications; yet the nursery often mimics in miniature the sterner realities of the great world; and since that day, handfuls of Englishmen have built breastworks out of materials almost as strange, and as little intended for the purpose, and have fought desperate and bloody fights, and won undying fame, in their defence.

"I'm going to be this chap, who takes on and off his horse," said Jack. "Which is you?"

"Here I am," answered Valentine. "Now then, you fire first – blaze away!"

As he spoke he picked up the veteran captain of the solid lead guards, and set him down in the centre of the defending force, and so the battle commenced. It was still raging when Jane came to say that tea was ready; but the losses on both sides had been terribly severe. The invading army still pressed forward, though the "57th" were once more decimated by the withering fire; and nothing actually remained of the "Coldstream Guards" but a kettle-drummer of uncertain nationality, and a man carrying a red and green flag, which he might very possibly have captured from some Sunday-school treat. The opposite side were in no better plight: men were lying crushed under the ruins of the works which they had so gallantly defended; and hardly enough artillerymen were left to have pulled back, with their united efforts, the spring of one of the pea cannons. The leaders on both sides remained unscathed, and continued to brandish bent lead swords at each other in mutual defiance.

"Make haste! you've got one more shot," said Valentine.

The pea-shooter was levelled and discharged, the veteran lead captain tottered and fell, and thus the fight ended.

"Val, my boy, you're killed!" cried Jack. "No matter, it's the bed of honour, old chap!"

"Oh, I don't mind!" answered the other, laughing. "*C'est la guerre*, you know; come along. I'd no idea you were so fond of soldiers."

So they passed down to Queen Mab's merry tea-table, unsaddened by any recollections of the stricken field, or of the lead commander left behind among the slain.

The two boys talked "soldiering" all the evening; and the next morning, when breakfast was nearly over, and Helen ran upstairs to inquire if they meant to lie on till dinner-time, they were still harping away on the same subject. The door was standing ajar, and she heard their words.

"Don't move your knee," Jack was saying; "that's the hill where I should post my artillery."

"Yes, that's all right," answered Valentine; "but you couldn't shell my reserves if I got them down under cover of this curl in the blanket. – All right, Helen! down directly!"

The sun was shining brightly, the fine weather seemed to have come at last, and the question was how to put it to the best possible use.

"Why don't you children go and picnic somewhere?" said Queen Mab. "You can have Prince and the carriage, and drive off where you like, and have tea out of doors."

A general meeting was held in the hayloft directly after dinner for the purpose of discussing this important question. Jack won a still higher place in Barbara's affections by hauling himself up the perpendicular ladder without touching the rungs with his feet; and though knowing little or nothing about such things as picnics, he was ready with any number of absurd suggestions.

"Let's go to Pitsbury Common," said Barbara; "there's such a lot of jolly sandpits to roll about in, and we can burn gorse-bushes."

"Oh, no, don't let's go there!" answered Helen; "there's no place to shelter in if it comes on rain, and when you're having tea the sand blows about and gets into everything, so that you seem to be eating it by mouthfuls."

"It's so nice having it out of doors," persisted Barbara.

"Well, let's go out in the road and sit with our feet in the ditch, like the tramps do," said Jack. "I'll bring the tea in my sponge bag. Rosher used to carry it about in his pocket, full of water for a little squirt he was always firing off in the French class. Pilson had the sentence, 'Give me something to drink;' and as soon as he'd said it, he got a squirtful all over the back of his head, and Durand –"

"Oh, stop that!" said Valentine, laughing. "Look here! I vote we drive over to Grenford, and call on the Fosbertons, and ask them to lend us their boat; they'd give us lunch, and then we could take our tea with us up the river. It's not more than six miles."

"Don't let's go there," said Barbara. "I hate them."

"Is Raymond away?" asked Helen.

"Yes; didn't you hear Queen Mab say he was going to spend his holidays in London? Uncle James is rather a pompous old fellow, but we shan't have to go there except for lunch; and father said we ought to call on them while we're here; besides, it'll be jolly on the river. You know them, don't you, Jack?"

"Well, I've *heard* about them," answered the other. "I know that the gov'nor's sister married old Fosberton, and that he got a lot of money making tin tacks, or whatever it was; and now he fancies he's rather a swell, and says he's descended from William the Conqueror's sea-cook, or something of that sort. I don't want to go and see them; but I don't mind having some grub there, if they'll lend us a boat."

"My senses! you ought to feel very much honoured at the thought of going to lunch at Grenford Manor," said Helen, laughing.

"I'm sure I don't," answered her cousin. "I'd sooner have a feed in old 'Duster's' shop at Melchester."

"Well, that's what we'll do," said Valentine. "We'll take a kettle and some cups with us, and tea, and all that sort of thing, and go up the river as far as Starnclyff, and there we'll camp out and have a jolly time."

With some reluctance the proposal was agreed upon. Had the company foreseen the chain of events which would arise directly and indirectly from this memorable picnic, they might have made up their minds to spend the day at Brenlands.

CHAPTER V. AN UNLUCKY PICNIC

"The tom-cat, whom his mistress called 'My little son,' was a great favourite; he could raise his back, and purr, and could even throw out sparks from his fur if it were stroked the wrong way." – *The Ugly Duckling*.

"Now, Jack, do behave yourself!" cried Valentine, as the basket-carriage turned through two imposing-looking granite gate-posts into a winding drive which formed the approach to Grenford Manor. Jack, as usual, seemed to grow particularly obstreperous just when circumstances demanded a certain amount of decorum, and at that moment he was kneeling on the narrow front seat belabouring Prince with the cushion.

"Well," he answered, turning round, "we must drive up to the door in style; if we come crawling in like this, they'll think we're ashamed of ourselves."

As he spoke, a curve in the drive brought the house into view. It was a big, square building, with not the slightest touch of green to relieve the monotony of the rigid white walls, and level rows of windows, which seemed to have been placed in position by some precise, mathematical calculation. A boy was lounging about in front of the porch, with his hands in his pockets, kicking gravel over the flower-beds.

"O Val! you said Raymond wasn't at home," murmured Helen.

"Well, Aunt Mab said he was going to London; he must have put off his visit."

Raymond Fosberton turned at the sound of the carriage-wheels, and sauntered forward to meet the visitors. He had black hair, and a very pink and white complexion. To say that he looked like a girl would be disparaging to the fair sex, but his face would at once have impressed a careful observer as being that of a very poor specimen of British boyhood.

"Hallo!" he said, without removing his hands from his pockets, "so you've turned up at last! You've been a beastly long time coming!"

He shook hands languidly with Valentine and the two girls, but greeted Jack with a cool stare, which the latter returned with interest. Grenford Manor was very different from Brenlands. Aunt Isabel was fussy and querulous, while Mr. Fosberton was a very ponderous gentleman in more senses than one. He had bushy grey whiskers and a very red face, which showed up in strong contrast to a broad expanse of white waistcoat, which was in turn adorned with a massive gold chain and imposing bunch of seals.

"Well, young ladies, and how are you?" he began in a deep, sonorous voice, of which he was evidently rather proud. "How are you, Valentine? So this is Basil's son? – hum! What's your father doing now?"

"I don't know," answered Jack, glancing at the clock. "I expect he's having his dinner, though there's no telling, for we're always a bit late at home."

Mr. Fosberton stared at the boy, cleared his throat rather vigorously, and then turned to speak to Helen.

Lunch was a very dry and formal affair. Raymond spoke to nobody, his father and mother addressed a few words to Valentine and the girls, but Jack was completely ignored. The latter, instead of noticing this neglect, pegged away merrily at salmon and cold fowl, and seemed devoutly thankful that no one interrupted his labours by forcing him to join in the conversation.

"You may tell your father," said Mr. Fosberton to Valentine, "that I find his family are related to one of the minor branches of my own; I've no doubt he will be pleased to hear it. His father's sister married a Pitsbury, a second cousin of the husband of one of the Fosbertons of Cranklen. You'll remember, won't you?"

Valentine said he would, and looked scared.

The silver spoons and forks were all ornamented with the Fosberton crest – a curious animal, apparently dancing on a sugar-stick.

"What is it?" whispered Barbara to Jack.

"The sea-cook's dog," answered her cousin.

"But what's he doing?"

"He's stolen the plum-duff, and the skipper's sent him up to ride on a boom, and he's got to stay there till he's told to come down."

At last the weary meal was over.

"I suppose we may have the boat," said Valentine.

"Oh, yes. I'm coming with you myself," answered Raymond; which announcement was received by Miss Barbara with an exclamation of "Bother!" which, fortunately, was only overheard by Jack, who smiled, and pinched her under the table.

It did not take long to transport the provisions and materials from the pony-carriage to the boat, and the party were soon under way. It was a splendid afternoon for a river excursion. Raymond, who had not offered to carry a thing on their way to the bank, lolled comfortably in the stern, leaving the other boys to do the work, and the girls to accommodate themselves as best they could. He was evidently accustomed to having his own way, and assumed the position of leader of the expedition.

"Have you finished school?" asked Jack.

"I don't go to one," answered the other; "I have a private tutor. I think schools are awful rot, where you're under masters, and have to do as you're told, like a lot of kids. I'm seventeen now. I'm going abroad this winter to learn French, then I'm coming home to read for the law. I say, why don't you row properly?"

"So I do."

"No, you don't; you feather too high."

"There you go again," continued the speaker petulantly a few moments later; "that's just how the Cockneys row."

"Sorry," said Jack meekly. "Look here, d'you mind showing me how it ought to be done?"

Raymond scrambled up and changed places with Jack. "There," he said – "that's the way – d'you see? Now, try again."

"No, thanks," answered Jack sweetly, "I'd rather sit here and watch you; it's rather warm work. I think I'll stay where I am."

Raymond did not seem to relish the joke, but it certainly had the wholesome effect of taking him down a peg, and rendering him a little less uppish and dictatorial for the remainder of the journey.

At Starncliff the right bank of the river rose rocky and precipitous almost from the water's edge. There was, however, a narrow strip of shore, formed chiefly of earth and shingle; and here the party landed, making the boat fast to the stump of an old willow.

"We promised Queen Mab that we wouldn't be very late," said Valentine, "so I should think we'd better have tea at once; it'll take some time to make the water boil."

There is always some special charm about having tea out of doors, even when the spout of the kettle gets unsoldered, or black beetles invade the tablecloth. To share one teaspoon between three, and spread jam with the handle-end of it, is most enjoyable, and people who picnic with a full allowance of knives and forks to each person ought never to be allowed to take meals in the open. Jack and Valentine set about collecting stones to build a fireplace, and there being plenty of dry driftwood about, they soon had a good blaze for boiling the water. The girls busied themselves unpacking the provisions; but Raymond Fosberton was content to sit on the bank and throw pebbles into the river.

The repast ended, the kettle and dishes were once more stowed away in the boat, and Valentine proposed climbing the cliff.

"It looks very steep," said Helen.

"There's a path over there by those bushes," answered her brother. "Come along; we'll haul you up somehow."

The ascent was made in single file, and half-way up the party paused to get their breath.

"Hallo!" cried Jack, "there's a magpie."

On a narrow ledge of rock and earth at the summit of the cliff two tall fir-trees were growing, and out of the top of one of these the bird had flown. The children stood and watched it, with its long tail and sharp contrast of black and white feathers, as it sailed away across the river.

"One for sorrow," said Helen.

"I shouldn't like to climb that tree," said Valentine. "It makes my head swim to look at it, leaning out like that over the precipice."

"Pooh!" answered Raymond; "that's nothing. I've climbed up trees in much worse places before now."

Helen frowned, and turned away with an impatient twitch of her lips.

Jack saw the look. "All right, Master Fosberton," he said to himself; "you wait a minute."

They continued their climb, and reaching the level ground above strolled along until they came opposite the tall tree out of which the magpie had flown.

"There's the nest!" cried Jack, pointing at something half hidden in the dark foliage of the fir. "Now, then, who'll go up and get it?"

"No one, I should think," said Helen. "If you fell, you'd go right down over the cliff and be dashed to pieces."

"I know I wouldn't try," added her brother. "I should turn giddy in a moment."

"Will you go?" asked Jack, addressing Raymond.

"No," answered the other.

"Why, I thought you said a moment ago that you've climbed trees in much worse places. Come, if you'll go up, I will."

"Not I," retorted Raymond sulkily; "it's too much fag."

"Oh, well, if you're afraid, I'll go up alone."

"Don't be such a fool, Jack," said Valentine; "there won't be any eggs or young birds in the nest now."

"Never mind; I should like to have a look at it."

Fenleigh J. of the Upper Fourth was a young gentleman not easily turned from his purpose, and, in spite of Valentine's warning and the entreaties of his girl cousins, he lowered himself down on to the ledge, and the next moment was buttoning his coat preparatory to making the attempt.

For the first twelve or fifteen feet the trunk of the fir afforded no good hold, but Jack swarmed up it, clinging to the rough bark and the stumps of a few broken branches. The spectators held their breath; but the worst was soon passed, and in a few seconds more he had gained the nest.

"There's nothing in it," he cried; "but there's a jolly good view up here, and, I say, if you want a good, high dive into the river, this is the place. Come on, Raymond; it's worth the fag."

"Oh, do come down!" exclaimed Helen. "It frightens me to watch you." She turned away, and began picking moon daisies, when suddenly an exclamation from Valentine caused her to turn round again.

"Hallo! what's the matter?"

Jack had just begun to slip down the bare trunk, but about a quarter way down he seemed to have stuck.

"My left foot's caught somehow," he said. "I can't get it free."

He twitched his leg, and endeavoured to regain the lower branches, but it was no good.

"Oh, do come down!" cried Helen, clasping her hands and turning pale. "Can't any one help him?"

Jack struggled vainly to free his foot.

"Look here," he said in a calm though strained tone, "my boot-lace is loose, and has got entangled with one of these knots; one of you chaps must come up and cut it free. Make haste, I can't hang on much longer."

Valentine turned to Raymond.

"You can climb," he said; "I can't."

"I'm not going up there," answered the other doggedly, and turned on his heel.

Valentine wheeled round with a fierce look upon his face, threw off his coat, took out his knife, opened it, and put it between his teeth.

"O Val!" cried Helen in a choking voice, and hid her face in her hands. Only Barbara had the strength of nerve to watch him do it, and could give a clear account afterwards of how her brother swarmed up the trunk, and held on with one arm while he cut the tangled lace. Valentine himself knew very little of what happened until he found himself back on the grass with Helen's arms round his neck.

"I thought you couldn't climb," said Jack, a minute later.

"It's possible to do most things when it comes to a case like that," answered the other quietly. "Besides, I remembered not to look down."

That sort of answer didn't suit Fenleigh J.; he caught hold of the speaker, and smacked him on the back.

"Look here, Valentine, the truth is you're a jolly fine fellow, and I never knew it until this moment."

The party strolled on across the field.

"It's precious hot still," said Raymond; "let's go and sit under that hayrick and rest."

"We mustn't stay very long," Helen remarked as they seated themselves with their backs against the rick. "We want to be home in time for supper."

"We can stay long enough for a smoke, I suppose," said Fosberton, producing a cigarette case. "Have one. What! don't you chaps smoke? Well," continued the speaker patronizingly, "you're quite right; it's a bad habit to get into. Leave it till you've left school."

"And then, when you smoke before ladies," added Helen, "ask their permission first."

"Oh, we haven't come here to learn manners," said Raymond, with a snort.

"So it appears," returned the lady icily.

Fenleigh J., who had been smarting under that "Leave it till you've left school," chuckled with delight, and began to think that he liked Helen quite as much as Barbara.

At length, when Raymond had finished his cigarette, the voyagers rose to return to the boat. Jack enlivened the descent of the cliff by every dozen yards or so pretending to fall, and starting avalanches of stones and earth, which were very disconcerting to those who went before. On arriving at the shingly beach, he proposed a trial of skill at ducks and drakes, and made flat pebbles go hopping right across the river, until Valentine put an end to the performance by saying it was time to embark. The girls were just stepping into the boat when Helen gave an exclamation of surprise.

"Look!" she cried, pointing towards the top of the cliff, "where can all that smoke be coming from?"

"It's a heap of rubbish burning in one of the fields," said Raymond.

"There's too much smoke for that," said Jack. "It may be a barn or a house. Wait a moment; I'll run up and see. I shan't be more than five or six minutes." He started off, jumping and scrambling up the path; but almost immediately on reaching the summit he turned and came racing down again.

"What a reckless beggar he is;" said Valentine. "He'll break his neck some day. Well, what is it?"

Jack took a flying jump from the path on to the shingle.

"The rick!" he cried – "the one we were sitting under – it's all in a blaze!"

The boys and girls stood staring at one another with a horrified look on their faces.

"You must have done it with your matches, Raymond," said Helen.

"I didn't," returned the other. "It's the sun. Come on into the boat."

"You must have dropped your cigarette end," said Valentine. "We ought to find the owner of the hay and say who we are."

"You fool! I tell you it wasn't me," returned the other passionately. "Ricks often catch fire of their own accord. I'm not going to be made pay for what isn't my fault."

Valentine hesitated, and shook his head. Jack seemed ready to side with him; but Raymond jumped into the boat and seized the oars. "Look here!" he cried, "it's my boat, and I'm going. If you don't choose to come, you can stay."

The two boys had no alternative but to obey their cousin's demand. Jack took the second oar, while Valentine steered. Raymond was ready enough now for hard work, and pulled away with all his might, evidently wishing to escape as fast as possible from the neighbourhood of the burning rick.

"What are you pulling so fast for?" asked Jack; but "stroke" made no reply, and seemed, if anything, to increase the pace.

"Look out!" cried Valentine, as the boat approached an awkward corner, one side of which was blocked by the branches of a big tree which had fallen into the water. "Steady on, Raymond!" "Stroke," who did not see what was coming, and thought this was only another attempt to induce him to lessen the speed at which they were going, pulled harder than ever. Valentine tugged his right-hand line crying, "Steady on, I tell you!" but it was too late. There was a tremendous lurch which nearly sent every one into the river, the water poured over the gunwale, and something went with a sounding crack. Raymond's oar had caught in a sunken branch and snapped off short. His face turned white with anger.

"You cad!" he cried with an oath, "you made me do that on purpose."

"I didn't!" answered Valentine hotly; "and I should think you might know better than to begin swearing before the girls."

Helen looked frightened, but Barbara was sinking with laughter at the sight of Jack, who, on the seat behind, was silently going through the motions of punching Master Fosberton's head.

"Well, we can't go on any further," said the latter. "We must get the boat into that backwater and tie her up. Though it'll be a beastly fag having to walk to Grenford."

Dividing between them the things which had to be carried, the cousins made their way through a piece of waste ground studded with gorse-bushes, and gained the road, which ran close to the river. Barbara lingered behind to pick Quaker grass, but a few moments later she came racing after them and caught hold of Jack's arm.

"Hallo!" he said, "what's up? you look scared."

"So I am," she answered. "I saw a man's face looking at me. He was hiding behind the bushes."

"Fiddles!" answered Jack. "It was only imagination. Come along with me. I'll carry those plates."

Raymond Fosberton seemed bent on making himself as disagreeable as possible. He was still in a great rage about the broken oar, and lagged behind, refusing to speak to the rest of the party.

"We ought not to let him walk by himself," said Helen, after they had gone about a mile; "it looks as if we wanted to quarrel."

She stopped and turned round, but Raymond was nowhere in sight. They waited, but still he did not appear.

"He can't be far behind," said Valentine. "I heard him kicking stones a moment or so ago."

Jack walked back to the last bend in the road and shouted, but there was no reply.

"It's a rum thing," he said, as he rejoined his companions. "I wonder what has become of the beggar. I thought just then I heard him talking."

The boys shouted again, and Barbara drew a little closer to Jack. Whether the watching face was imagination or not, she had evidently been frightened.

"Surly brute! he has gone home by a short cut," said Jack. "Come along! it's no use waiting."

They had not gone very far when they heard somebody running, and turning again saw their missing cousin racing round the corner. His face was pale and agitated, and it was evident that something was the matter.

"Hallo! where have you been?"

"Nowhere. I only stopped to tie my shoe-lace."

"But you must have heard us calling?"

"I never heard a sound," answered Raymond abruptly, and so the matter ended.

The four Fenleights were not at all sorry to find themselves free of their cousin's society, and bowling along behind Prince in the little basket-carriage. It was still more delightful to be back once more at Brenlands, and there, round the supper-table, to give Queen Mab an account of their adventures.

"I should like to know who that man was whom I saw hiding among the bushes," said Barbara.

"I should like to know what Raymond was up to when we missed him coming home," said Valentine.

"Yes," added Jack thoughtfully; "he was hiding away somewhere, for I could have sworn I heard his voice when I walked back to the corner."

CHAPTER VI. A KEEPSAKE

"He is my own child, and he is not so very ugly after all, if you look at him properly." – *The Ugly Duckling*.

The holidays passed too quickly, as they always did at Brenlands. Jack was no longer the ugly duckling. Whatever misunderstanding or lack of sympathy might have existed hitherto between himself and Valentine had melted away in the sunny atmosphere of Queen Mab's court; and since the incident of the magpie's nest, the two boys had become fast friends.

Soldiering was their great mutual hobby. They constructed miniature earthworks in the garden, mounted brass cannon thereon, fired them off with real powder, and never could discover where the shots went to. They read and re-read "A Voice from Waterloo," the only military book they could discover in their aunt's bookcase; and on wet days the bare floor of the empty room upstairs was spread with the pomp and circumstance of war. The soldiers had a wonderful way of concealing their sufferings; they never groaned or murmured, and, shot down one day, were perfectly ready to take the field again on the next, and so when the solid lead captain or die mounted officer who took on and off his horse was "put out of mess" by a well-directed pea, the knowledge that they would reappear ready to fight again another day considerably lessened one's grief at the sight of their fall. Perhaps, after all, lead is a more natural "food for powder" than flesh and blood, and so the only time tears were shed over one of these battles was one morning when Barbara surreptitiously crammed two dozen peas into her mouth, fired them with one prolonged discharge into the midst of Valentine's cavalry, and then fled the room, whereupon Jack sat down and laughed till he cried.

It would be difficult to say what it was that made Queen Mab's nephews and nieces like to wander out into the kitchen and stand by her side when she was making pastry or shelling peas; but they seemed to find it a very pleasant occupation, and in this, after the first week of his stay, Jack was not a whit behind the others.

He was sitting one morning on a corner of the table, watching with great interest his aunt's dexterous use of the rolling-pin.

"Well, Jack," she said, looking up for a moment to straighten her back, "are you sorry I made you come to Brenlands?"

"No, rather not; I never enjoyed myself so much before. I should like to stay here always."

"What! and never go home again?"

The moment that word was mentioned he was once more Fenleigh J. of the Upper Fourth.

"Home!" he said; "I hate the place. I've got no friends I care for, and the gov'nor's always complaining of something, and telling me he can't afford to waste the money he does on my education, because I don't learn anything. I do think I'm the most unlucky beggar under the sun. I've got nothing to look forward to. But I don't care. When I'm older I'll cut the whole show, and go away and enlist. Any road, I won't stay longer than I can help at Padbury."

Queen Mab smiled, and went on cutting out the covering for an apple-tart.

"I know you like soldiers," she said; "well, listen to this. Just before the battle of Waterloo, the father of Sir Henry Lawrence was in charge of the garrison at Ostend. He knew that some great action was going to take place, and wished very much to take part in it; so he wrote to Wellington, reminding him that they had fought together in the Peninsular War, and asking leave to pick out the best of the troops then under his command and come with them to the front. The duke sent him back this reply, – "That he remembered him well, and believed he was too good a soldier to wish for any other post than the one which was given to him.""

"You're preaching at me," said Jack suspiciously; "it's altogether different in my case."

"No, I'm not preaching; I'm only telling you a story. Now go and find my little Bar, and say I've got some bits of dough left, and if she likes she can come and make a pasty."

Barbara came, and Jack assisted her in the manufacture of two shapeless little turn-overs, which contained an extraordinary mixture of apples, currants, sugar, and a sprinkling of cocoa put in "to see what it would taste like." But the boy's attention was not given wholly to the work, his mind was partly occupied with something else. He wandered over and stood at the opposite end of the table, watching Queen Mab as she put the finishing touch to her pie-crust, twisting up the edge into her own particular pattern.

"I don't see why people shouldn't wish for something better when they have nothing but bad luck," he said.

"I don't think people ever do have nothing but bad luck."

"Yes, they do, and I'm one of them. I hate people who're always preaching about being contented with one's lot."

"You intend that for me, I suppose," said his aunt, slyly. "All right; if you weren't out of reach I'd shake the flour dredge over you!"

"No, you know I don't mean you," said the boy, laughing. "And I have had one stroke of good luck, and that was your asking me to Brenlands."

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