CLASSICS TO GO

A HERO OF ROMANCE

RICHARD MARSH

A Hero of Romance

Richard Marsh

"Perhaps you don't know who I am?" (*Page* 155)

A Hero of Romance.] [*Frontispiece.*

"Perhaps you don't know who I am?"

Contents

Chapter I

PUNISHMENT AT MECKLEMBURG HOUSE

It was about as miserable an afternoon as one could wish to see. May is the poet's month, but there was nothing of poetry about it then. True, it was early in the month, but February never boasted weather of more unmitigated misery. At half-past two it was so dark in the schoolroom of Mecklemburg House that one could with difficulty see to read. Outside a cold drizzling rain was falling, a shrieking east wind was rattling the windows in their frames, and a sullen haze was hiding the leaden sky. As unsatisfactory a specimen of the English spring as one could very well desire.

To make things better, it was half-holiday. Not that it much mattered to the young gentleman who was seated in the schoolroom; it was no half-holiday to him. A rather tall lad, some fourteen years of age, broad and strongly built. This was Bertie Bailey.

Master Bertie Bailey was kept in; and the outrage this was to his feelings was altogether too deep for words. To keep him in!--no wonder the heavens frowned at such a crime!

Master Bertie Bailey was seated at a desk very much the worse for wear; a long desk, divided into separate compartments, which were intended to accommodate about a dozen boys. He had his arms upon the desk, his face

rested on his hands, and he was staring into vacancy with an air of tragic gloom.

At the raised desk which stood in front of him before the window was seated Mr. Till. Mr. Till's general bearing and demeanour was not much more jovial than Master Bertie Bailey's; he was the tyrant usher who had kept the youthful victim in. It was with a certain grim pleasure that Bertie realized that Mr. Till's enjoyment of the keeping-in was perhaps not much more than his own.

Mr. Till had a newspaper in his hand, and had apparently read it through, advertisements and all. He looked over the top of it at Bertie.

"Don't you think you'd better get on with those lines?" he asked.

Bertie had a hundred lines of *Paradise Lost* to copy out. He paid no attention to the inquiry; he did not even give a sign that he was aware he had been spoken to, but continued to sit with his eyes fixed on nothing, with the same air of mysterious gloom.

"How many have you done?" Mr. Till came down to see. There was a torn copy of Milton's poems lying unopened beside Bertie on the desk; in front of him a slate which was quite clean, and no visible signs of a slate pencil. Mr. Till took up the slate and carefully examined it for anything in the shape of lines.

"So you haven't begun?--why haven't you begun?" No answer. "Do you hear me? why haven't you begun?"

Without troubling himself to alter in any way his picturesque posture, Bertie made reply,--

"I haven't got a slate pencil."

"You haven't got a slate pencil? Do you mean to tell me you've sat there for a whole hour without asking for a slate pencil? I'll soon get you one."

Mr. Till went to his desk and produced a piece about as long as his little finger, placing it in front of Bertie. Bertie eyed it from a corner of his eye.

"It isn't long enough."

"Don't tell me; take your arms off the desk and begin those lines at once."

Bertie very leisurely took his arms off the desk, and delicately lifted the piece of slate pencil.

"It wants sharpening," he said. He began to look for his knife, standing up to facilitate the search. He hunted in all his pockets, turning out the contents of each upon the desk; finally, from the labyrinthine depths of some mysterious depository in the lining of his waistcoat, he produced the ghost of an ancient pocket-knife. As though they were fragile treasures of the most priceless kind, he carefully replaced the contents of his pockets. Then, at his ease, he commenced to give an artistic point to his two-inch piece of slate pencil. Mr. Till, who had taken up a position in front of the window with his hands under his coat tails, watched the proceedings with anything but a gratified countenance.

"That will do," he grimly remarked, when Bertie had considerably reduced the original size of his piece of pencil by attempting to produce a point of needlelike fineness. Bertie wiped his knife upon his coat-sleeve, removed the pencil dust with his pocket-handkerchief, and commenced to

write. Before he had got half-way through the first line a catastrophe occurred.

"I've broken the point," he observed, looking up at Mr. Till with innocence in his eyes.

"I tell you what it is," said Mr. Till, "if you don't let me have those lines in less than no time I'll double them. Do you think I'm going to stop here all the afternoon?"

"You needn't stop," suggested Bertie, looking at his broken pencil.

"I daresay!" snorted Mr. Till. The last time Bertie had been left alone in the schoolroom on the occasion of his being kept in, he had perpetrated atrocities which had made Mr. Fletcher's hair stand up on end. Mr. Fletcher was the head-master. Orders had been given that whenever Bertie was punished, somebody was to stay in with him. "Now, none of your nonsense; you go on with those lines."

Bertie bent his head with a studious air. A hideous scratching noise arose from the slate. Mr. Till clapped his hands to his ears.

"Stop that noise!"

"If you please, sir, I think this pencil scratches," Bertie said. Considering that he was holding the pencil perpendicularly, the circumstance was not surprising.

"Take my advice, Bailey, and do those lines." Advancing with an inflamed countenance, Mr. Till stood over the offending pupil. Resuming his studious posture Bertie recommenced to write. He wrote two lines, not too quickly, nor by any means too well, but still he wrote them. In the middle of the third line another catastrophe happened.

"Please, sir, I've broken the pencil right in two." It was quite unnecessary for him to say so, the fact was self-evident, though with so small a piece it had required no slight exertion of strength and some dexterous manipulation to accomplish the feat. The answer was a box on the ears.

"What did you do that for?" asked Bertie, rising from his seat, and rubbing the injured portion with his hand.

Now it was distinctly understood that Mecklemburg House Collegiate School was conducted on the principle of no corporal punishment. It was a prominent line in the prospectus. "*Under no circumstances is corporal punishment administered*." As a rule the principle was consistently carried out to its legitimate conclusion, not with the completest satisfaction to every one concerned. Yet Mr. Fletcher, one of the most longsuffering of men, and by no means the strictest disciplinarian conceivable, had been more than once roused into administering short and sharp justice upon refractory youth. But what was excusable in Mr. Fletcher was not to be dreamed of in the philosophy of anybody else. For an assistant-master to strike a pupil was a crime; and Mr. Till knew it, and Master Bertie Bailey knew it too.

"What did you do that for?" repeated Bertie.

Mr. Till was crimson. He was not a hasty tempered man, but to-day Master Bertie Bailey had been a burden greater than he could bear. Yet he had very literally made a false stroke, and Bertie was just the young gentleman to make the most of it.

"If I were to tell Mr. Fletcher, he'd turn you off," said Bertie. "He turned Mr. Knox off for hitting Harry Goddard."

Harry Goddard's only relation was a maiden aunt, and this maiden aunt had peculiar opinions. In her opinion for anybody to lay a punitory hand upon her nephew was to commit an act tantamount to sacrilege. Harry had had a little difference with Emmett minor, and had borne away the blushing honours of a bloody nose and a black eye with considerable *sang-froid*; but when Mr. Knox resented his filling his best hat with half-melted snow by presenting him with two or three smart taps upon a particular portion of his frame, Harry wrote home to his aunt to complain of the indignity he had endured. The result was that the ancient spinster at once removed the outraged youth from the sanguinary precincts of Mecklemburg House, and that Mr. Fletcher dismissed the offending usher.

As Mr. Till stood eyeing his refractory pupil, all this came forcibly to his mind. He knew something more than Bertie did; he knew that when Mr. Fletcher, smarting at the loss of a remunerative pupil, had made short work of his unfortunate assistant, he had also taken advantage of the occasion to call Mr. Till into his magisterial presence, and to then and there inform him, that should he at any time lay his hand upon a pupil, under any provocation of any kind whatever, the result would be that Mr. Knox's case would be taken as a precedent, and he would be instantaneously dismissed.

And now he had struck Bertie, and here was Bertie threatening to inform his employer of what he had done.

"If you don't let me off these lines," said Bertie, pursuing his advantage, "I'll tell Mr. Fletcher as soon as he comes home, you see if I don't."

Mecklemburg House Collegiate School was not a scholastic establishment of any particular eminence;

indeed, whatever eminence it possessed was of an unsavoury kind. Nor was the position of its assistant-master at all an enviable one. There was the senior assistant, Mr. Till, and there was the junior, Mr. Shane. Mr. Till received £30 a year, and Mr. Shane, a meek, melancholy youth of about seventeen, received sixteen. Nor could the duties of either of these gentlemen be considered light. But if the pay was small and the work large, the intellectual qualifications required were by no means of an unreasonable kind. Establishments of the Mecklemburg House type are fading fast away. English private schools are improving every day. Mr. Till, conscious of his deficiencies, was only too well aware that if he lost his present situation, another would be hard to find. So, in the face of Bertie's threat, he temporized.

"I didn't mean to hit you! You shouldn't exasperate me!"

Bertie looked him up and down. If ever there was a young gentleman who needed the guidance of a strong hand, Bertie was he. He was not a naturally bad boy,--few boys are,--but he hated work, and he scorned authority. All means were justifiable which enabled him to shirk the one and defy the other. He was just one of those boys who might become bad if he was not brought to realize the difference between good and evil, right and wrong. And it would need sharp discipline to bring him to such knowledge.

He had a supreme contempt for Mr. Till. All the boys had. The only person they despised more was Mr. Shane. It was the natural result of the system pursued at Mecklemburg House that the masters were looked upon by their pupils as quite unworthy their serious attention.

Bertie had had about a dozen impositions inflicted on him even within the last days. He had not done one of them. He

never did do them. None of the boys ever did do impositions set them by anybody but Mr. Fletcher. They did not by any means make a point of doing his.

"You will do me fifty lines," Mr. Till would say to half a dozen boys half a dozen times over in the course of a single morning. He spoke to the wind; no one ever did them, no one would have been so much surprised as Mr. Till if they had been done.

On the present occasion Mr. Fletcher had gone to town on business, and Mr. Till had been left in supreme authority. Bailey had signalised the occasion by behaving in a manner so outrageous that, if any semblance of authority was to be kept at all, it was altogether impossible to let him go scot free. As it was a half-holiday, Mr. Till had announced his unalterable resolve that Bertie should copy out a hundred lines of *Paradise Lost*, and that he should not leave the schoolroom till he had written them.

The result so far had not been satisfactory. He had been in the schoolroom considerably over an hour; he had written not quite three lines, and here he was telling Mr. Till that if he did not let him off entirely he would turn the tables on his master, and make matters unpleasant for him. It looked as though Bertie would win the game.

Having taken the tutor's mental measure, he thrust his hands into his trousers pockets, and coolly seated himself upon the desk. Then he made the following observation,--

"I tell you what it is, old Till, I don't care a snap for you."

Mr. Till simply glared. He realized, not for the first time, that the pupil was too much for the master. Bertie continued,--

"My father always pays regularly in advance. If I wrote home and told him that you'd hit me, for nothing"--Bertie paused and fixed his stony gaze on Mr. Till--"he'd take me home at once, and then what would Fletcher say?" Bertie paused again, and pointed his thumb over his left shoulder. "He'd say, 'Walk it'!"

This was one way of putting it. Though Mr. Bailey was by no means such a foolish person as his son suggested. He was very much unlike Harry Goddard's maiden aunt. Had Bertie written home any such letter of complaint--which, by the way, he was far too wise to have dreamed of doing--the consequences would in all probability have been the worse for him. The father knew his son too well to be caught with chaff. Unfortunately, Mr. Till did not know this; he had Mr. Knox's fate before his eyes.

"You'd better let me off these lines," pursued the inexorable Bertie; "you'd better, you know."

"You're an impudent young----" But Bertie interrupted him.

"Now don't call me names, or I'll tell Fletcher. He only said the other day that all his pupils were to be treated like young gentlemen."

"Young gentlemen!" snorted Mr. Till with scorn.

"Yes, young gentlemen. And don't you say we're not young gentlemen, because Mecklemburg House Collegiate School is an establishment for young gentlemen." And Bertie grinned. "You'd better let me off these lines, you know."

"You know I never hurt you; you shouldn't exasperate me; you're the most exasperating boy I ever knew; there's

absolutely no bearing with your insolence! You'd try the patience of a saint."

"I shouldn't be surprised if I was deaf for a week." He rubbed the injured part reflectively. "I've heard Fletcher say it's dangerous to hit a fellow on the ear. You'd better let me off those lines, you know."

Mr. Till, fidgeting about the room, suddenly burst into eloquence. "I wonder if it's any use appealing to your better nature? They say boys have a better nature, though I never remember to have seen much of it. What pleasure do you find in making my life unbearable? What have I ever done to you that you should try to drive me mad? Are you naturally cruel? My sole aim is for your future welfare! Your sole aim is for my ruin!"

Bertie continued to rub his ear.

"Bailey, if I let you off these lines will you promise to try to give me less cause to punish you?"

"You can't help letting me off them anyhow," said Bertie.

"Can't I? I suppose, young gentleman, you think you're getting the best of me?"

"I know I am," said Bertie.

"Oh, you know you are! Then let me do my best to relieve you of that delusion. Shall I tell you what you are doing? You're doing your best to sow the seeds of a shameful manhood and a wasted life; if you don't take care you'll reap the harvest by-and-by! It isn't only that you're refusing to avail yourself of opportunities of education, you're doing yourself much greater harm than that. You think you're getting the best of me; but shall I tell you what's getting the

best of you?--a mean, cruel, cowardly spirit, which will be to you a sterner master than ever I have been. You think yourself brave because you jeer and mock at me, and flout all my commands! Why, my boy, were I better circumstanced, and free to act upon my own discretion, you would tremble in your shoes! The very fact of your permitting yourself to threaten me, on account of punishment which you know was perfectly well deserved, shows what sort of boy you are!"

Bertie's only comment was, "You had better let me off those lines."

"I will let you off the lines!"

Bertie sprang to his feet, and began to put slate and book away with abundance of clatter.

"Stay one moment--leave those things alone! It is not the punishment which degrades a man, Bailey; it is the thing of which he has been guilty. I cannot degrade you; it is yourself you are degrading. Take my advice, turn over a new leaf, learn not to take advantage of a man whose only offence is that he does his best to do you good; don't think yourself brave because you venture to attack where defence is impossible; and, above all, don't pride yourself on taking your pigs to a bad market. You are so foolish as to think yourself clever because you throw away all your best chances, and get absolutely worse than nothing in return. Bailey, get your Bible, and look for a verse which runs something like this, 'Cast your bread upon the waters, and you shall find it after many days.' Now you can go."

And Bertie went; and, being in the safe neighbourhood of the door, he put his fingers to his nose; by which Mr. Till knew, not for the first time, that he had spoken in vain.

Chapter II

TUTOR BAITING

There were twenty-seven boys at Mecklemburg House; and even this small number bade fair to decrease. Last term there had been thirty-three; the term before there had been forty. Within quite recent years considerably over a hundred boys had occupied the draughty dormitories of the great old red-brick house.

But the glory was departing. It is odd how little our fathers and our grandfathers in general knew or cared about the science of education. Boys were pitchforked into schools which had absolutely nothing to recommend them except a flourishing prospectus; schools in which nothing was taught, in which the physique of the lads was neglected, and in which their moral nature was treated as a thing which had no existence. A large number of "schoolmasters" had no more idea of true education than they had of flying. They were speculators pure and simple, and they treated their boys as goods out of which they were to screw as much money as they possibly could, and in the shortest possible space of time.

Mecklemburg House Collegiate School was a case in point. It had been a school ever since the first of the Georges; and it is, perhaps, not too much to say, that out of the large number of boys who had been educated beneath its roof, not one of them had received a wholesome education. Yet it had always been a paying property. More than one of its principals had retired with a comfortable

competency. Certainly the number of its pupils had never stood at such a low ebb as at the time of which we tell. Why the number should be so uncomfortably low was a mystery to its present principal, Beauclerk Fletcher. The place had belonged to his father, and his father had always found it bring something more than daily bread. But even daily bread was beginning to fail with Beauclerk Fletcher. Twenty-seven pupils at such a place as Mecklemburg House! and the majority of them upon "reduced terms"! Mr. Fletcher, never the most enterprising of men, was beginning to be overwhelmed beneath an avalanche of debt, and to feel that the fight was beyond his strength.

A great, old, rambling red-brick house, about equi-distant from Cobham, Byfleet, Weybridge--all towns in Surrey--lying in about the middle of the irregular square which those four towns form, the house carried the story of its decaying glories upon its countenance. Those Georgian houses were solid structures, and the mere fabric was in about as good a condition as it had ever been! but in the exterior of the building the change was sadly for the worse. Many of the rooms were unoccupied, panes were broken in the windows, curtains were wanting, the windows looked as though they were seldom or never cleaned. The whole place looked as though it were neglected, which indeed it was. Slates were off the roof, waste water pipes hung loose and rattled in every passing breeze. As to the paved courtyard in front, grass and weeds and moss almost hid the original stones. Mr. Fletcher was only too conscious of the story all this told; but to put things shipshape and neat, and to keep them so, required far more money than he had to spend; so he only groaned at each new evidence of ruin and decay.

The internal arrangements, the domestic economy, the whole system of education, everything in connection with Mecklemburg House was in the same state of decrepitude

and age--worn-out traditions rather than living things. And Mr. Fletcher was very far from being the man to breathe life into the dead bones and bid them live. The struggle was beyond his strength.

There is no creature in God's world sharper than the average boy, no one quicker to understand the strength of the hand which holds him. The youngest pupil at Mecklemburg House was perfectly aware that the school was a "duffing" school, that Mr. Fletcher was a "duffing" principal, and that everything about the place was "duffing" altogether. Only let a boy have this opinion about his school, and, so far as any benefit is concerned which he is likely to derive from his sojourn there, he might almost as profitably be transported to the Cannibal Islands.

On the half-holiday on which our story opens, the pupils of Mecklemburg House were disporting themselves in what was called the playroom. Formerly, in its prosperous days, the room had been used as a second schoolroom, the one at present used for that purpose being not nearly large enough to contain the pupils. But those days were gone; at present, so far from being overcrowded, the room looked empty, and could have with ease accommodated twice the whole number of pupils which the school contained. So what was once the schoolroom was called the playroom instead.

"Stupid nonsense! keeping a fellow in because it rains!" said Charles Griffin, looking through the dirty window at the grimy world without.

"It doesn't rain," declared Dick Ellis. "Call this rain! I say, Mr. Shane, can't we go down to the village? I want to get something for this cough of mine; it's frightful." And with some difficulty Dick managed to produce a sepulchral cough from somewhere about the region of his boots.

"Mrs. Fletcher says you are not to go out while it rains," answered Mr. Shane in his mildest possible manner.

"Mrs. Fletcher!" grunted Dick. At Mecklemburg House the grey mare was the better horse. If Mr. Fletcher was not an ideal head-master, Mrs. Fletcher was emphatically head-mistress.

That half-holiday was a pleasant one for Mr. Shane. It was a rule that the boys were never to be left alone. If they were out a master was to go with them, if they were in a master was to supervise. So, as Mr. Till was engaged with the refractory Bertie, Mr. Shane was in charge of the play-room.

In charge, literally, and in terror, too. For it may be maintained without the slightest exaggeration, that he was much more afraid of the boys than the boys of him. On what principle of selection Mr. Fletcher chose his assistant-masters it is difficult to say; but whatever else Mr. Shane was, a disciplinarian he certainly was not. He was the mildest-mannered young man conceivable, awkward, shy, slight, thin, not bad-looking, with a faint, watery smile, which at times gave quite a ghastly appearance to his countenance, and a deprecatory manner which seemed to say that you had only to let him alone to earn his eternal gratitude. But the boys never did let him alone, never. By day and night, awake and sleeping, they did their best to make his life a continual misery.

"If we can't go out," suggests Griffin, "I vote we have a lark with Shane."

Mr. Shane smiled, by no means jovially.

"You mustn't make a noise," he murmured, in that soft, almost effeminate voice of his. "Mrs. Fletcher particularly said you were not to make a noise."

"Right you are. I say, Shane, you stand against the wall, and let's shy things at you." This from Griffin.

"You're not to throw things about," said Mr. Shane.

"Then what are we to do, that's what I want to know? It seems to me we're not to do anything. I never saw such a beastly hole! I say, Shane, let half of us get hold of one of your arms, and the other half of the other, and have a pull at you--tug-of-war, you know. We won't make a noise."

Mr. Shane did not seem to consider the proposal tempting. He was seated in the window, and had a book on his knees which he wanted to read. Not a work of light literature, but a German grammar. It was the dream of his life to prepare himself for matriculation at the London University. This undersized youth was a student born; he had company which never failed him, a company of dreams. He dreamed of a future in which he was a scholar of renown; and in every moment he could steal he strove to bring himself a step nearer to the realization of his dreams.

"Get up, Shane!--what's that old book you've got?" Griffin made a snatch at the grammar. Mr. Shane jealously put it behind his back. Books were in his eyes things too precious to be roughly handled. "Come and have a lark; what an old mope you are!" Griffin caught him by the arm and swung him round into the room; the boy was as tall, and probably as strong as the usher.

The boys were chiefly engaged in doing nothing; nobody ever did do much in that establishment. If a boy had a hobby it was laughed out of him. Literature was at a discount: *Spring-Heeled Jack* and *The Knights of the Road* were the sort of works chiefly in request. There was no school library, none of the boys seemed to have any books

of their own. There was neither cricket nor football, no healthy games of any sort. Even in the playground the principal occupation was loafing, with a little occasional bullying thrown in. Mr. Fletcher was too immersed in the troubles of pounds, shillings, and pence to have any time to spare for the amusements of the boys. Mr. Till was not athletic. Mr. Shane still less so. On fine afternoons the boys were packed off with the ushers for a walk, but no more spiritless expeditions could be imagined than the walks at Mecklemburg House. The result was that the youngsters' life was a wearisome monotony, and they were in perpetual mischief for sheer want of anything else to do. And mischief so often took the shape of cruelty.

Charlie Griffin swung Mr. Shane out into the middle of the room, and immediately one boy after another came stealing up to him.

"I say, Shane, let's play roley-poley with you," said Brown major. Some one in the rear threw a hard pellet of brown paper, which struck Mr. Shane smartly on the head. He winced.

"Who threw that?" asked Griffin. "I say, Shane, why don't you whack him? If I were a man I wouldn't let little boys throw things at me; you are a man, aren't you, Shane?" He gave another jerk to the arm which he still held.

"You're not to pull my arm, Griffin; you hurt me. I wonder why you boys can't leave me alone."

"Go along! not really! We're only having a game, Shane; we're not in school, you know. What shall we do with him, you fellows? I vote we tie him in a chair, and stick needles and pins into him; he's sure to like that--he's such a jolly old fellow, Shane is."

"Why don't you let us go out?" asked Ellis.

"You know Mrs. Fletcher said you were not to go."

"Oh, bother Mrs. Fletcher! what's that got to do with it? We won't tell her if you let us go."

Mr. Shane sighed. Had it rested with him he would have been only too glad to let them go. Two or three hours of his own company would have been like a glimpse of paradise. But there was Mrs. Fletcher; she was a lady whose indignation was not to be lightly faced.

"If you won't let us go," said Ellis, "we'll make it hot for you. Do you think we're a lot of babies, to be melted by a drop of rain?"

"You know it's no use asking me. Mrs. Fletcher said you were not to go out if it rained, and it is raining."

"It's not raining," boldly declared Griffin. "Call this rain! why, it's not enough to wet a cat! I never saw such a molly-coddle set-out. I go out when I'm at home if it pours cats and dogs; nobody minds; why should they? Come on, Shane, let's go, there's a trump; we won't sneak, and we'll be back in half a jiff.

"I wish you would let me alone," said Mr. Shane. Somebody snatched his book out of his hand. He turned swiftly to recover it, but the captor was out of reach. "Give me my book!" he cried. "How dare you take my book!"

"Here's a lark! catch hold, Griffin." Mr. Shane, hurrying to recover his treasure, saw it dexterously thrown above his reach into the hands of Charlie Griffin.

"Give me my book, Griffin!" And he made a rush at Griffin.

"Catch, boys!" Griffin threw the book to some one else before Mr. Shane could reach him. It was thrown from one to the other, from end to end of the room, probably not being improved by the way in which it was handled.

The usher stood in the midst of the laughing boys, a picture of helplessness. The grammar had cost him half a crown at a second-hand bookstall. Half a crown represented to him a handsome sum. There were many claims upon his sixteen pounds a year; he had to think once, and twice, and thrice before he spent half a crown upon a book. His books were to him his children. In those dreams of future glory his books were his constant companions, his open sesame, his royal road to fame; with their aid he could do so much, without their aid so little. So now and then he ventured to spend half a crown upon a volume which he wanted.

The grammar, being badly aimed, fell just in front of him. He made a dash at it. Some one gave him a push and he fell sprawling on the floor; but he seized the book with his left hand. Griffin, falling on it tooth and nail, caught hold of it before he could secure it from danger. There was a rush of half a dozen. Every one wanted a finger in the pie. The grammar was clutched by half a dozen hands at once. The back was rent off, leaves pulled out, the book was torn to shreds. Mr. Shane lay on the floor, with the ruins of his grammar in his hands.

Just then Bertie Bailey entered the room, victorious from his contest with Mr. Till. A shout of welcome greeted him.

"Hullo, Bailey! have you done the lines?"

Bertie, a deliberate youth as a rule, took his time to answer. He surveyed the scene, then he put his fingers to

his nose, repeating the gesture with which he had retreated from Mr. Till.

"Catch me at it!--think I'm a silly?" Then he put his hands into his pockets, and slouched into the centre of the room. The boys crowded round him.

"Did he let you off?" asked Griffin.

"Of course he let me off; I made him: he knew better than to try to make me do his lines."

Then he told the story; the boys laughed. The way in which the ushers were compelled to stultify themselves was a standing joke at Mecklemburg House. That Mr. Till should have been forced to eat his own words, and to let insubordination go unpunished, was a humorous idea to them.

Mr. Shane still remained upon the floor. He was engaged in gathering together the remnants of his grammar. Perhaps a pot of paste, with patient manipulation, might restore it yet. He would give himself a great deal of labour to avoid the expenditure of another half-crown; perhaps he had not another half-crown to spend.

"What's the row?" asked Bertie, seeing Mr. Shane engaged in gathering up the fragmentary leaves. They told him.

"I'm going out," said Bailey, "and I should like to see anybody stop me. I say, Mr. Shane, I want to go down to the village."

Mr. Shane repeated his stock phrase.

"Mrs. Fletcher said no one was to go out while it rained." He had collected all the remnants of his grammar, and was rising with them in his hand.

"Give me hold!" exclaimed Bertie; and he snatched what was left of the book out of the usher's hands.

"Bailey!" cried Mr. Shane.

"Look here, I want to go down to the village. I suppose I may, mayn't I?"

"Mrs. Fletcher said no one was to go out if it rained," stammered Mr. Shane.

"If you don't let me go, I'll burn this rubbish!" Bertie flourished the ruined grammar in the tutor's face. Mr. Shane made a dart to recover his property; but Bertie was too quick for him, and sprang aside beyond his reach. It is not improbable that if it had come to a tussle Mr. Shane would have got the worst of it.

"Who's got a match?" asked Bertie. Some one produced half a dozen. "Will you let me go?"

"Don't burn it," said Mr. Shane. "It cost me half a crown; I only bought it last week."

"Then let me go."

"What'll Mrs. Fletcher say?"

"How's she to know unless you tell her? I'll be back before tea. I don't care if it cost you a hundred half-crowns, I'll burn it. Make up your mind. Is it going to cost you half a crown to keep me in?"

Bertie struck a match. Mr. Shane attempted to rush forward to put it out, but some of the boys held him back. His heart went out to his book as though it were a child.

"If I let you go, you promise me to be back within half an hour? I don't know what Mrs. Fletcher will say if she should hear of it;--and don't get wet."

"I'll promise you fast enough. Mrs. Fletcher won't hear of it; and what if she does? She can't eat you. You needn't be afraid of my getting wet."

"I shan't let anybody else go."

"Oh yes, you will! You'll let Griffin and Ellis go; you don't think I'm going all that way alone?"

"And me!" cried Edgar Wheeler. Pretty nearly all the other boys joined him in the cry.

"I am not going to have all you fellows coming with me," announced Bertie. "Wheeler can come; but as for the rest of you, you can stay at home and go to bed--that's the best place for little chaps like you. Now then, Shane, look alive; is it going to cost you half a crown, or isn't it?"

Mr. Shane sighed. If ever there was a case of a round peg in a square hole, Mr. Shane's position at Mecklemburg House was a case in point. The youth, for he was but a youth, was a good youth; he had an earnest, honest, practical belief in God; but surely God never intended him for an assistant-master. Perhaps in the years to come he might drift into the place which had been prepared for him in the world, but it was difficult to believe that he was in it now. A studious dreamer, who did nothing but dream and study, he would have been no more out of his element in a bear garden than in the extremely difficult and eminently

unsatisfactory position which he was supposed--it was veritable supposition--to fill at Mecklemburg House.

"How many of you want to go?"

"There's me,"--Bertie was not the boy to take the bottom seat--"and Griffin, and Ellis, and Wheeler, that's all. Now what is the good of keeping messing about like this?"

"You're sure you won't be more than half an hour?"

"Oh, sure as sticks."

"And what shall I say to Mrs. Fletcher if she finds out? You're sure to lay all the blame on me." Mr. Shane had a prophetic eye.

"Say you thought it didn't rain."

"I don't think it does rain much." Mr. Shane looked out of the window, and salved his conscience with the thought. "Well, if you're quite sure you won't get wet, and you won't be more than half an hour--you--can--go." The latter three words came out, as it were, edgeways and with difficulty from the speaker's mouth, as if even he found the humiliation of his attitude difficult to swallow.

"Come along, boys!--here's your old book!" Bertie flung the grammar into the air, the leaves went flying in all directions, the four boys went clattering out of the room with noise enough for twenty, and Mr. Shane was left to recover his dignity and collect the scattered volume at his leisure.

But Nemesis awaited him. No sooner had the conquering heroes disappeared than an urchin, not more than eight or

nine years of age, catching up one of the precious leaves, exclaimed,--

"Let's tear the thing to pieces!" The speaker was little Willie Seymour, Bertie Bailey's cousin. It was his first term at school, but he already bade fair to do credit to the system of education pursued at Mecklemburg House.

"Right you are, youngster," said Fred Philpotts, an elder boy. "It's a burning shame to let them go and keep us in. Let's tear it all to pieces."

And they did. There was a sudden raid upon the scattered leaves; at the mercy of twenty pairs of mischievous hands, they were soon reduced to atoms so minute as to be altogether beyond the hope of any possible recovery. Nothing short of a miracle could make those tiny scraps of printed paper into a book again. And seeing it was so Mr. Shane leaned his head against the window-pane and cried.

Chapter III

AT MOTHER HUFFHAM'S

It was only when Bailey and his friends were away from the house that it occurred to them to consider what it was they had come out for. They slunk across the grass-grown courtyard, keeping as close to the wall as possible, to avoid the lynx-eyes of Mrs. Fletcher. That lady was the only person in Mecklemburg House whose authority was not entirely contemned. Let who would be master, she would be mistress; and she had a way of impressing that fact upon those around her which made it quite impossible for those who came within reach of her influence to avoid respecting.

It was truly miserable weather. Any one but a schoolboy would have been only too happy to have had a roof of any kind to shelter him, but schoolboys are peculiar. It was one of those damp mists which not only penetrate through the thickest clothing, and soak one to the skin, but which render it difficult to see twenty yards in front of one, even in the middle of the day. The day was drawing in; ere long the lamps would be lighted; the world was already enshrouded in funeral gloom. Not a pleasant afternoon to choose for an expedition to nowhere in particular, in quest of nothing at all.

The boys slunk through the sodden mist, hands in their pockets, coat collars turned up about their ears, hats rammed down over their eyes, looking anything but a cheerful company. Griffin asked a question.

"I say, Bailey, where are you going?"

"To the village."

"What are you going to the village for?" This from Ellis.

"For what I am."

After this short specimen of convivial conversation the four trudged on. Alas for their promise to Mr. Shane! The wet was already dripping off their hats, and splashings of mud were ascending up the legs of their trousers to about the middle of their back. In a minute or two Wheeler began again.

"Have you got any money?"

Bertie pulled up short. "Have you?" he asked.

"I've got sevenpence."

"Then lend me half?"

"Lend me a penny? I'll pay you next week; honour bright, I will," said Ellis.

Griffin was more concise. "Lend me twopence?" he asked.

Wheeler looked unhappy. It appeared that he was the only capitalist among the four, and under the circumstances he did not feel exactly proud of the position. Although sevenpence might do very well for one, it would not be improved by quartering.

"Yes, I know, I daresay," he grumbled. "You're very fond of borrowing, but you're not so fond of paying back again." He trudged on stolidly.