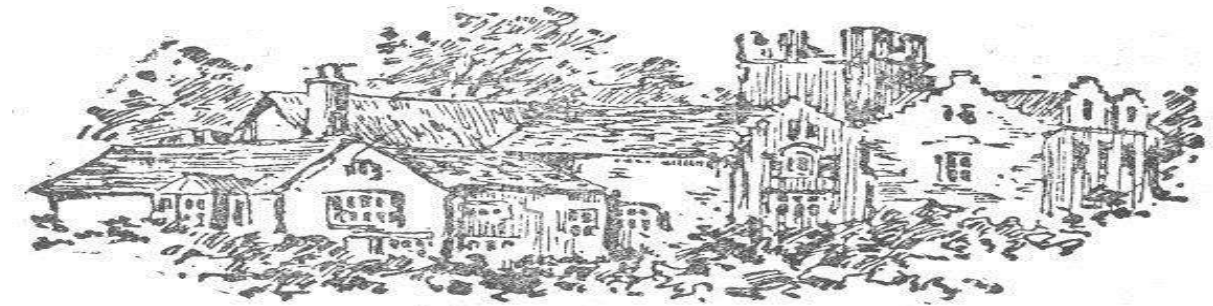


CHAPTER XIII.

Marlow. Bisham Abbey. The Medmenham Monks. Montmorency thinks he will murder an old Tom cat. But eventually decides that he will let it live. Shameful conduct of a fox terrier at the Civil Service Stores. Our departure from Marlow. An imposing procession. The steam launch, useful receipts for annoying and hindering it. We decline to drink the river. A peaceful dog. Strange disappearance of Harris and a pie.

Marlow is one of the pleasantest river centres I know of. It is a bustling, lively little town; not very picturesque on the whole, it is true, but there are many quaint nooks and corners to be found in it, nevertheless standing arches in the shattered bridge of Time, over which our fancy travels back to the days when Marlow Manor owned Saxon Algar for its lord, ere conquering William seized it to give to Queen Matilda, ere it passed to the Earls of Warwick or to worldly-wise Lord Paget, the councillor of four successive sovereigns.

There is lovely country round about it, too, if, after boating, you are fond of a walk, while the river itself is at its best here. Down to Cook ham, past the Quarry Woods and the meadows, is a lovely reach. Dear old Quarry Woods! with your narrow, climbing paths, and little winding glades, how scented to this hour you seem with memories of sunny summer days! How haunted are your shadowy vistas with the ghosts of laughing faces! how from your whispering leaves there softly fall the voices of long ago!



From Marlow up to Sonning is even fairer yet. Grand old Bisham Abbey, whose stone walls have rung to the shouts of the Knights Templars, and which, at one time, was the home of Anne of Cleves and at another of Queen Elizabeth, is passed on the right bank just half a mile above Marlow Bridge. Bisham Abbey is rich in melodramatic properties. It contains a tapestry bed-chamber, and a secret room hid high up in the thick walls. The ghost of the Lady Holy, who beat her little boy to death, still walks there at night, trying to wash its ghostly hands clean in a ghostly basin.

Warwick, the king-maker, rests there, careless now about such trivial things as earthly kings and earthly kingdoms; and Salisbury, who did good service at Poitiers. Just before you come to the abbey, and right on the rivers bank, is Bisham Church, and, perhaps, if any tombs are worth inspecting, they are the tombs and monuments in Bisham Church. It was while floating in his boat under the Bisham beeches that Shelley, who was then living at Marlow (you can see his house now, in West street), composed *The Revolt of Islam*.

By Hurley Weir, a little higher up, I have often thought that I could stay a month without having sufficient time to drink in all the beauty of the scene. The village of Hurley, five minutes walk from the lock, is as old a little spot as there is on the river, dating, as it does, to quote the quaint phraseology of those dim days, from the times of King Sebert and King Offa. Just past the weir (going up) is Danes Field, where the invading Danes once encamped, during their march to Gloucestershire; and a little further still, nestling by a sweet corner of the stream, is what is left of Medmenham Abbey.

The famous Medmenham monks, or Hell Fire Club, as they were commonly called, and of whom the notorious Wilkes was a member, were a fraternity whose motto was Do as you

please, and that invitation still stands over the ruined doorway of the abbey. Many years before this bogus abbey, with its congregation of irreverent jesters, was founded, there stood upon this same spot a monastery of a sterner kind, whose monks were of a somewhat different type to the revellers that were to follow them, five hundred years afterwards.

The Cistercian monks, whose abbey stood there in the thirteenth century, wore no clothes but rough tunics and cowls, and ate no flesh, nor fish, nor eggs. They lay upon straw, and they rose at midnight to mass. They spent the day in labour, reading, and prayer; and over all their lives there fell a silence as of death, for no one spoke.

A grim fraternity, passing grim lives in that sweet spot, that God had made so bright! Strange that Nature's voices all around them the soft singing of the waters, the whisperings of the river grass, the music of the rushing wind should not have taught them a truer meaning of life than this. They listened there, through the long days, in silence, waiting for a voice from heaven; and all day long and through the solemn night it spoke to them in myriad tones, and they heard it not.

From Medmenham to sweet Hambledon Lock the river is full of peaceful beauty, but, after it passes Greenlands, the rather uninteresting looking river residence of my news agent a quiet unassuming old gentleman, who may often be met with about these regions, during the summer months, sculling himself along in easy vigorous style, or chatting genially to some old lock-keeper, as he passes through until well the other side of Henley, it is somewhat bare and dull.

We got up tolerably early on the Monday morning at Marlow, and went for a bathe before breakfast; and, coming back, Montmorency made an awful ass of himself. The only subject on which Montmorency and I have any serious difference of opinion is cats. I like cats; Montmorency does not.



When I meet a cat, I say, Poor Pussy! and stop down and tickle the side of its head; and the cat sticks up its tail in a rigid, cast-iron manner, arches its back, and wipes its nose up against my trousers; and all is gentleness and peace. When Montmorency meets a cat, the whole street knows about it; and there is enough bad language wasted in ten seconds to last an ordinarily respectable man all his life, with care.

I do not blame the dog (contenting myself, as a rule, with merely clouting his head or throwing stones at him), because I take it that it is his nature. Fox-terriers are born with about four times as much original sin in them as other dogs are, and it will take years and years of patient effort on the part of us Christians to bring about any appreciable reformation in the rowdiness of the fox-terrier nature.

I remember being in the lobby of the Haymarket Stores one day, and all round about me were dogs, waiting for the return of their owners, who were shopping inside. There were a mastiff,

and one or two collies, and a St. Bernard, a few retrievers and Newfoundlands, a boar-hound, a French poodle, with plenty of hair round its head,

but mangy about the middle; a bull-dog, a few Lowther Arcade sort of animals, about the size of rats, and a couple of Yorkshire tykes.

There they sat, patient, good, and thoughtful. A solemn peacefulness seemed to reign in that lobby. An air of calmness and resignation of gentle sadness pervaded the room.

Then a sweet young lady entered, leading a meek-looking little fox-terrier, and left him, chained up there, between the bull-dog and the poodle. He sat and looked about him for a minute. Then he cast up his eyes to the ceiling, and seemed, judging from his expression, to be thinking of his mother. Then he yawned. Then he looked round at the other dogs, all silent, grave, and dignified.

He looked at the bull-dog, sleeping dreamlessly on his right. He looked at the poodle, erect and haughty, on his left. Then, without a word of warning, without the shadow of a provocation, he bit that poodles near fore-leg, and a yelp of agony rang through the quiet shades of that lobby.

The result of his first experiment seemed highly satisfactory to him, and he determined to go on and make things lively all round. He sprang over the poodle and vigorously attacked a collie, and the collie woke up, and immediately commenced a fierce and noisy contest with the poodle. Then Foxey came back to his own place, and caught the bull-dog by the ear, and tried to throw him away; and the bull-dog, a curiously impartial animal, went for everything he could reach, including the hall-porter, which gave that dear little terrier the opportunity to enjoy an uninterrupted fight of his own with an equally willing Yorkshire tyke.

Anyone who knows canine nature need hardly, be told that, by this time, all the other dogs in the place were fighting as if their hearths and homes depended on the fray. The big dogs fought each other indiscriminately; and the little dogs fought among themselves, and filled up their spare time by biting the legs of the big dogs.

The whole lobby was a perfect pandemonium, and the din was terrific. A crowd assembled outside in the Haymarket, and asked if it was a vestry meeting; or, if not, who was being murdered, and why? Men came with poles and ropes, and tried to separate the dogs, and the police were sent for.

And in the midst of the riot that sweet young lady returned, and snatched up that sweet little dog of hers (he had laid the tyke up for a month, and had on the expression, now, of a new-born lamb) into her arms, and kissed him, and asked him if he was killed, and what those great nasty brutes of dogs had been doing to him; and he nestled up against her, and gazed up into her face with a look that seemed to say: Oh, I am so glad you've come to take me away from this disgraceful scene!

She said that the people at the Stores had no right to allow great savage things like those other dogs to be put with respectable peoples dogs, and that she had a great mind to summon somebody.

Such is the nature of fox-terriers; and, therefore, I do not blame Montmorency for his tendency to row with cats; but he wished he had not given way to it that morning.

We were, as I have said, returning from a dip, and half-way up the High Street a cat darted out from one of the houses in front of us, and began to trot across the road. Montmorency gave a cry of joy the cry of a stern warrior who sees his enemy given over to his hands the

sort of cry Cromwell might have uttered when the Scots came down the hill and flew after his prey.

His victim was a large black Tom. I never saw a larger cat, nor a more disreputable-looking cat. It had lost half its tail, one of its ears, and a fairly appreciable proportion of its nose. It was a long, sinewy-looking animal. It had a calm, contented air about it.

Montmorency went for that poor cat at the rate of twenty miles an hour; but the cat did not hurry undid not seem to have grasped the idea that its life was in danger. It trotted quietly on until its would-be assassin was within a yard of it, and then it turned round and sat down in the middle of the road, and looked at Montmorency with a gentle, inquiring expression, that said:

Yes! You want me?

Montmorency does not lack pluck; but there was something about the look of that cat that might have chilled the heart of the boldest dog. He stopped abruptly, and looked back at Tom.

Neither spoke; but the conversation that one could imagine was clearly as follows:

THE CAT: Can I do anything for you?

MONTMORENCY: No-no, thanks.

THE CAT: Don't you mind speaking, if you really want anything, you know.

MONTMORENCY (*backing down the High Street*): Oh, no not at all certainly don't you trouble. I am afraid I've made a mistake. I thought I knew you. Sorry I disturbed you.

THE CAT: Not at all quite a pleasure. Sure you don't want anything, now?

MONTMORENCY (*still backing*): Not at all, thanks not at all very kind of you. Good morning.

THE CAT: Good-morning.

Then the cat rose, and continued his trot; and Montmorency, fitting what he calls his tail carefully into its groove, came back to us, and took up an unimportant position in the rear.

To this day, if you say the word Cats! to Montmorency, he will visibly shrink and look up piteously at you, as if to say:

Please don't.

We did our marketing after breakfast, and revictualled the boat for three days. George said we ought to take vegetables that it was unhealthy not to eat vegetables. He said they were easy enough to cook, and that he would see to that; so we got ten pounds of potatoes, a bushel of peas, and a few cabbages. We got a meat pie, a couple of gooseberry tarts, and a leg of mutton from the hotel; and fruit, and cakes, and bread and butter, and jam, and eggs, and other things we foraged round about the town for.

Our departure from Marlow I regard as one of our greatest successes. It was dignified and impressive, without being ostentatious. We had insisted at all the shops we had been to that the things should be sent with us then and there. None of your Yes, sir, I will send them off at once: the boy will be down there before you are, sir! and then fooling about on the landing-stage, and going back to the shop twice to have a row about them, for us. We waited while the basket was packed, and took the boy with us.

We went to a good many shops, adopting this principle at each one; and the consequence was that, by the time we had finished, we had as fine a collection of boys with baskets following us around as heart could desire; and our final march down the middle of the High Street, to the river, must have been as imposing a spectacle as Marlow had seen for many a long day.

The order of the procession was as follows:

Montmorency, carrying a stick.

Two disreputable-looking curs, friends of Montmorency's.

George, carrying coats and rugs, and smoking a short pipe.

Harris, trying to walk with easy grace,

while carrying a bulged-out Gladstone bag in one hand

and a bottle of lime-juice in the other.

Greengrocers boy and bakers boy,

with baskets.

Boots from the hotel, carrying hamper.

Confectioners boy, with basket.

Grocers boy, with basket.

Long-haired dog.

Cheesemongers boy, with basket.

Odd man carrying a bag.

Bosom companion of odd man, with his hands in his pockets,
smoking a short clay.

Fruiterers boy, with basket.

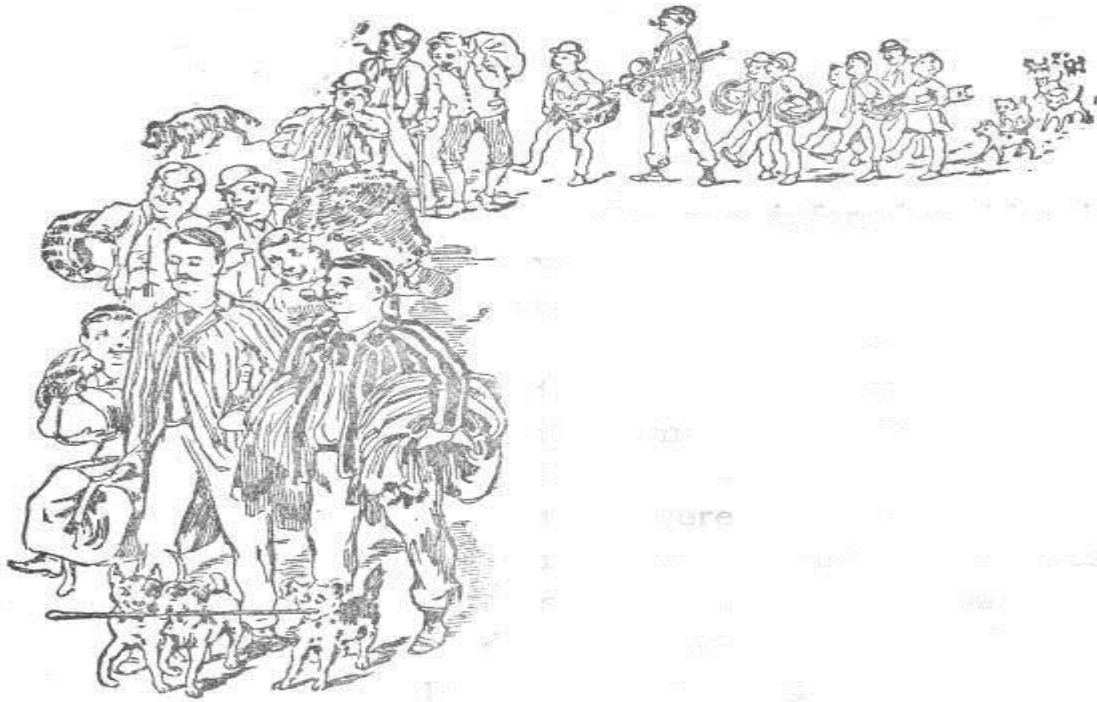
Myself, carrying three hats and a pair of boots,

and trying to look as if I didn't know it.

Six small boys, and four stray dogs.

When we got down to the landing-stage, the boatman said:

Let me see, sir; was yours a steam-launch or a house-boat?



On our informing him it was a double-sculling skiff, he seemed surprised.

We had a good deal of trouble with steam launches that morning. It was just before the Henley week, and they were going up in large numbers; some by themselves, some towing houseboats. I do hate steam launches: I suppose every rowing man does. I never see a steam launch but I feel I should like to lure it to a lonely part of the river, and there, in the silence and the solitude, strangle it.

There is a blatant bumptiousness about a steam launch that has the knack of rousing every evil instinct in my nature, and I yearn for the good old days, when you could go about and tell people what you thought of them with a hatchet and a bow and arrows. The expression on the face of the man who, with his hands in his pockets, stands by the stern, smoking a cigar, is sufficient to excuse a breach of the peace by itself; and the lordly whistle for you to get out of the way would, I am confident, ensure a verdict of justifiable homicide from any jury of river men.

They used to *have* to whistle for us to get out of their way. If I may do so, without appearing boastful, I think I can honestly say that our one small boat, during that week, caused more annoyance and delay and aggravation to the steam launches that we came across than all the other craft on the river put together.

Steam launch, coming! one of us would cry out, on sighting the enemy in the distance; and, in an instant, everything was got ready to receive her. I would take the lines, and Harris and George would sit down beside me, all of us with our backs to the launch, and the boat would drift out quietly into mid-stream.

On would come the launch, whistling, and on we would go, drifting. At about a hundred yards off, she would start whistling like mad, and the people would come and lean over the side, and roar at us; but we never heard them! Harris would be telling us an anecdote about his mother, and George and I would not have missed a word of it for worlds.

Then that launch would give one final shriek of a whistle that would nearly burst the boiler, and she would reverse her engines, and blow off steam, and swing round and get aground; everyone on board of it would rush to the bow and yell at us, and the people on the bank would stand and shout to us, and all the other passing boats would stop and join in, till the whole river for miles up and down was in a state of frantic commotion. And then Harris would break off in the most interesting part of his narrative, and look up with mild surprise, and say to George:

Why, George, bless me, if here isn't a steam launch!

And George would answer:

Well, do you know, I *thought* I heard something!

Upon which we would get nervous and confused, and not know how to get the boat out of the way, and the people in the launch would crowd round and instruct us:

Pull your right you, you idiot! back with your left. No, not *you* the other one leave the lines alone, cant you now, both together. NOT *that* way. Oh, you!

Then they would lower a boat and come to our assistance; and, after quarter of an hours effort, would get us clean out of their way, so that they could go on; and we would thank them so much, and ask them to give us a tow. But they never would.

Another good way we discovered of irritating the aristocratic type of steam launch, was to mistake them for a beanfeast, and ask them if they were Messrs. Cubits lot or the Bermondsey Good Templars, and could they lend us a saucepan.

Old ladies, not accustomed to the river, are always intensely nervous of steam launches. I remember going up once from Staines to Windsora stretch of water peculiarly rich in these mechanical monstrosities with a party containing three ladies of this description. It was very exciting. At the first glimpse of every steam launch that came in view, they insisted on landing and sitting down on the bank until it was out of sight again. They said they were very sorry, but that they owed it to their families not to be fool-hardy.

We found ourselves short of water at Hambledon Lock; so we took our jar and went up to the lock-keepers house to beg for some.

George was our spokesman. He put on a winning smile, and said:

Oh, please could you spare us a little water?

Certainly, replied the old gentleman; take as much as you want, and leave the rest.

Thank you so much, murmured George, looking about him. Where where do you keep it?

Its always in the same place my boy, was the stolid reply: just behind you.

I don't see it, said George, turning round.

Why, bless us, whares your eyes? was the mans comment, as he twisted George round and pointed up and down the stream. There's enough of it to see, aren't there?

Oh! exclaimed George, grasping the idea; but we cant drink the river, you know!

No; but you can drink *some* of it, replied the old fellow. Its what *I've* drunk for the last fifteen years.

George told him that his appearance, after the course, did not seem a sufficiently good advertisement for the brand; and that he would prefer it out of a pump.

We got some from a cottage a little higher up. I daresay *that* was only river water, if we had known. But we did not know, so it was all right. What the eye does not see, the stomach does not get upset over.

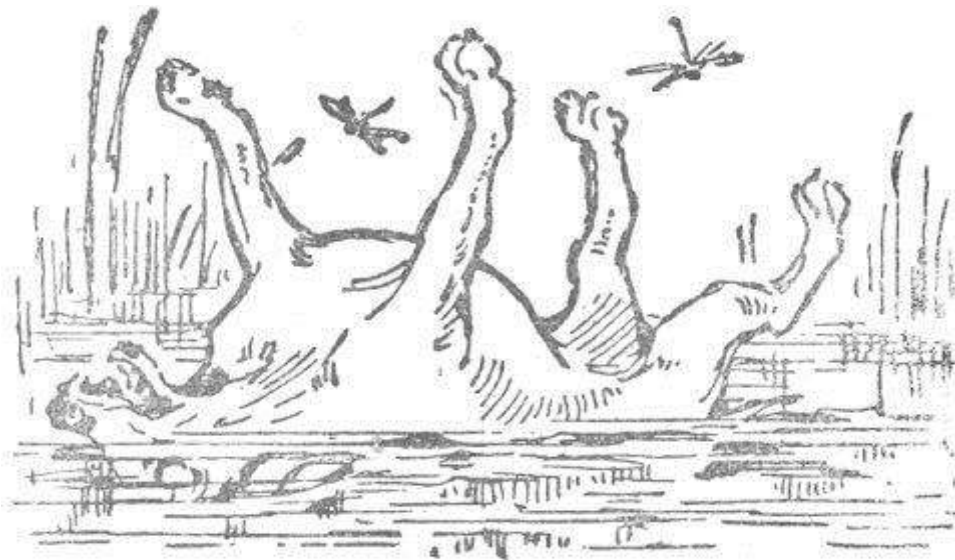
We tried river water once, later on in the season, but it was not a success. We were coming down stream, and had pulled up to have tea in a backwater near Windsor. Our jar was empty, and it was a case of going without our tea or taking water from the river. Harris was for chancing it. He said it must be all right if we boiled the water. He said that the various germs of poison present in the water would be killed by the boiling. So we filled our kettle with Thames backwater, and boiled it; and very careful we were to see that it did boil.

We had made the tea, and were just settling down comfortably to drink it, when George, with his cup half-way to his lips, paused and exclaimed:

What's that?

What's what? asked Harris and I.

Why that! said George, looking westward.



Harris and I followed his gaze, and saw, coming down towards us on the sluggish current, a dog. It was one of the quietest and peace fullest dogs I have ever seen. I never met a dog who seemed more contented more easy in its mind. It was floating dreamily on its back, with its four legs stuck up straight into the air. It was what I should call a full-bodied dog, with a well-developed chest. On he came, serene, dignified, and calm, until he was abreast of our boat, and there, among the rushes, he eased up, and settled down cosily for the evening.

George said he didn't want any tea, and emptied his cup into the water. Harris did not feel thirsty, either, and followed suit. I had drunk half mine, but I wished I had not.

I asked George if he thought I was likely to have typhoid.

He said: Oh, no; he thought I had a very good chance indeed of escaping it. Anyhow, I should know in about a fortnight, whether I had or had not.

We went up the backwater to War grave. It is a short cut, leading out of the right-hand bank about half a mile above Marsh Lock, and is well worth taking, being a pretty, shady little piece of stream, besides saving nearly half a mile of distance.

Of course, its entrance is studded with posts and chains, and surrounded with notice boards, menacing all kinds of torture, imprisonment, and death to everyone who dares set scull upon its waters I wonder some of these riparian boors don't claim the air of the river and threaten everyone with forty shillings fine who breathes it but the posts and chains a little skill will easily avoid; and as for the boards, you might, if you have five minutes to spare, and there is nobody about, take one or two of them down and throw them into the river.

Half-way up the backwater, we got out and lunched; and it was during this lunch that George and I received rather a trying shock.

Harris received a shock, too; but I do not think Harriss shock could have been anything like so bad as the shock that George and I had over the business.

You see, it was in this way: we were sitting in a meadow, about ten yards from the waters edge, and we had just settled down comfortably to feed. Harris had the pie between his knees, and was carving it, and George and I were waiting with our plates ready.

Have you got a spoon there? says Harris; I want a spoon to help the gravy with.

The hamper was close behind us, and George and I both turned round to reach one out. We were not five seconds getting it. When we looked round again, Harris and the pie were gone!

It was a wide, open field. There was not a tree or a bit of hedge for hundreds of yards. He could not have tumbled into the river, because we were on the water side of him, and he would have had to climb over us to do it.

George and I gazed all about. Then we gazed at each other.

Has he been snatched up to heaven? I queried.

They'd hardly have taken the pie too, said George.

There seemed weight in this objection, and we discarded the heavenly theory.

I suppose the truth of the matter is, suggested George, descending to the commonplace and practicable, that there has been an earthquake.

And then he added, with a touch of sadness in his voice: I wish he hadn't been carving that pie.

With a sigh, we turned our eyes once more towards the spot where Harris and the pie had last been seen on earth; and there, as our blood froze in our veins and our hair stood up on end, we saw Harriss head and nothing but his head sticking bolt upright among the tall grass, the face very red, and bearing upon it an expression of great indignation!

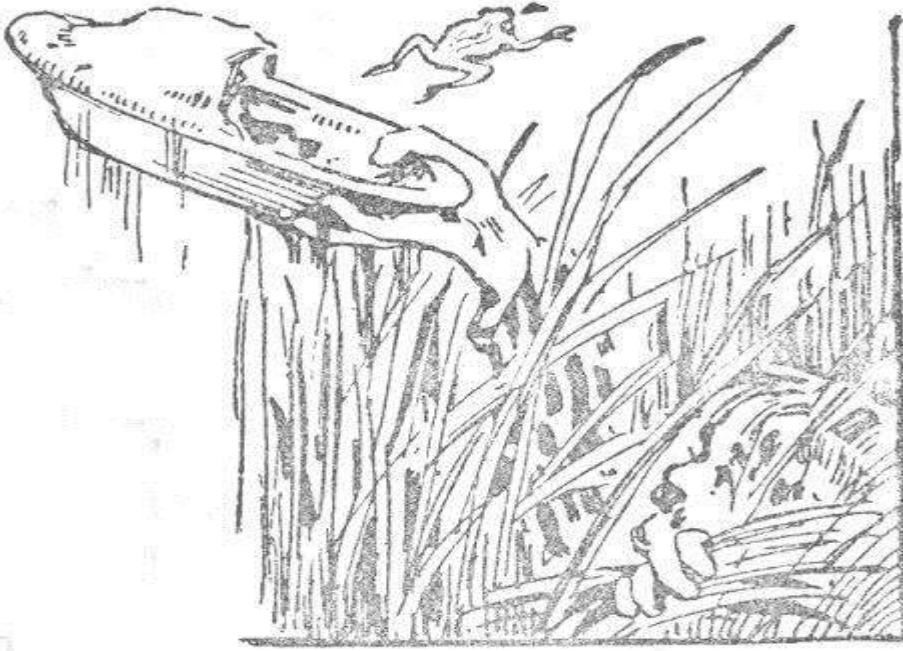
George was the first to recover.

Speak! he cried, and tell us whether you are alive or dead and where is the rest of you?

Oh, don't be a stupid ass! said Harriss head. I believe you did it on purpose.

Did what? exclaimed George and I.

Why, put me to sit here darn silly trick! Here, catch hold of the pie.



And out of the middle of the earth, as it seemed to us, rose the pie very much mixed up and damaged; and, after it, scrambled Harris tumbled, grubby, and wet.

He had been sitting, without knowing it, on the very verge of a small gully, the long grass hiding it from view; and in leaning a little back he had shot over, pie and all.

He said he had never felt so surprised in all his life, as when he first felt himself going, without being able to conjecture in the slightest what had happened. He thought at first that the end of the world had come.

Harris believes to this day that George and I planned it all beforehand. Thus does unjust suspicion follow even the most blameless for, as the poet says, Who shall escape calumny?

Who, indeed!