

"It's all right," answered Roderick, "I'm trying some of this stuff. Where's the butter?"

"Inside the cat mostly," said Jack, discovering and picking up the dish. "S'cat, you beast!" and he kicked the dignified Thomas off the rug.

The conversation turned presently on all they intended doing during this delightful holiday. Roderick was not new to the town, but his cousins were, and they began to lay plans that could scarcely have been carried out in three months. There were inter-colonial football matches to be seen; there was a man-of-war in harbour, which Uncle James had promised to take them over, and any number of excursions to make. After tea, when the table was cleared, they indulged in a little horseplay, a thing which must have been a revelation to Major Elliot's chairs and couches, and then Roderick threw open the piano and sat down to play with a pink lamp shade on his head.

This was the moment Cuthbert chose for his "lark." Winking at Jack, he slipped out of the room, and finding his way to the study, took the mysterious box out of the cupboard. When he came back Roderick was thumping away and shouting:

"Oh! I'm a British soldier  
Of the dashing Light Brigade,  
And mid war's dreadful horrors  
I never feel a-fraid."

He was just beginning to expatiate musically upon the difficulty Britannia's sons find in ever, ev-er, yielding, when Cuthbert thrust the box under his nose, and interrupted him without ceremony.

"Look at this, Rod," he said, "one of uncle's old Indian things."

"What is it?" asked Roderick, twirling round on the piano-stool, and cocking the lamp shade over one eye. "A box—what's in it—anything to eat?"

"Not likely," said Cuthbert, innocently, and Jack in the background doubled up with a sudden emotion.

"Let's have a look," said Roderick. "How does it open? Oh, I see!"

He put his forefinger in the notch, and unsuspectingly jerked back the lid. But before it was half off there darted out with lightning-like rapidity a hideous counterfeit snake, with curved back and wicked darting head, it struck viciously at the boy's hand.

Cuthbert and Jack were waiting ready to burst into a roar of laughter, but the effect the hideous creature had on Roderick surpassed all their expectations. He loosed his hold of the box instantly, as Jack had done, and shrieked hysterically.

"Oh, oh!" he cried, starting up and growing pale through his healthy tan. "Oh! Cuthbert!" and he stumbled over the legs of the piano-stool, and fell backwards on the heavy fender.

Jack and Cuthbert shouted with laughter at the success of their joke, but their merriment was short-lived, for Roderick did not get up.

"What's up with him?" cried Jack in alarm, and Cuthbert hastily went to his prostrate cousin.

"Rod, I say, *Rod!*" he whispered in a frightened voice, and pulled him by the arm.

Roderick sat up, looking dazed, and put his hand to his head.

"Why, dash it, I'm in the fireplace," he remarked. Cuthbert sighed with relief, and began at once to upbraid him.

"You ass, get up! Whatever did you go and make such a fuss for?"

"It bit me—the thing," said Roderick.

"You young beast! I'll pay you and Jack out."

The brothers howled him down, and laughed aloud with derision.

"It's not alive, you idiot! It's a wooden thing—it's a kind of game."

"It's a pretty rotten kind of one," grumbled the victim, who was angry and ashamed of his panic. "Look at the back of my hand; there's a hole like a pin-prick."

"That's rum!" said Jack, in some surprise. "It never went through my skin—"