

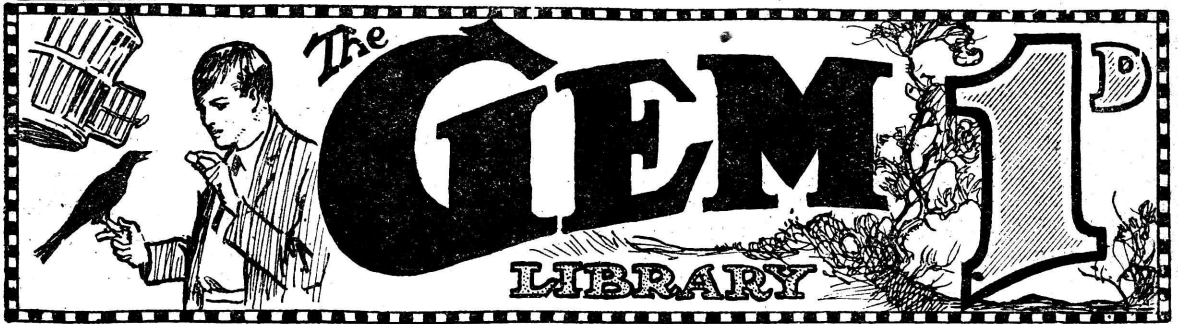
Next
Thursday:

"THE SCHOOLBOY EXPLORERS!"

By
Martin Clifford.

Every

Thursday.



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"UNDER SEALED ORDERS!"

A Splendid New, Long, Complete School and
Adventure Tale of TOM MERRY & CO. at
St. Jim's.

By

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

A Startling Attack.

"GREAT Scott! Look there!"

Tom Merry, of St. Jim's, uttered the words in startled tones. He was standing on the green, sloping bank of the Ryll, where it ran past the school grounds. Manners and Lowther, Tom Merry's chums in the Shell Form, were lying in the grass of the bank—Manners reading a manual of photography, and Lowther lying with his hands behind his head gazing at the blue autumn sky, a picture of lazy comfort. Tom Merry had been reading, and he had just risen to his feet. And as he did so the startled words broke from his lips.

He looked away across the shining river, towards the towing-path on the opposite bank. The Ryll was very wide at this point, though further on, towards Rylcombe, it narrowed and shallowed, and there the old stone bridge spanned the stream. Against the blue sky a line of old elms raised their branches, already thinning of foliage in the autumn winds, but casting deep shadows on the towing-path.

Tom Merry shaded his eyes with his hands as he gazed intently across the river.

"Jump up, you chaps! Quick!"

"The amateur photographer who uses films instead of plates has this advantage," mumbled Manners, reading aloud. Monty Lowther yawned.

"What's the matter with you, Tommy? What are you getting excited about?"

"Get up!"

"I'm very comfortable where I am, thank you!" said Lowther, settling himself in the grass. "It isn't quite tea-time yet."

Tom Merry reached out with his boot, and kicked Manners, book from his hand, and then gave Monty Lowther a dig in the ribs with the toe of the boot. There were two yells from the chums of the Shell.

"You ass!"

"Ow!"

"Get up, then!" said Tom Merry severely. "Look here, this looks to me like a highway robbery! Look across the river!"

"My hat!" ejaculated Lowther.

The juniors of St. Jim's jumped up. Tom Merry pointed across the river, and they looked.

On the towing-path a portly old gentleman with white whiskers, and white hair peeping from under his silk hat, was walking slowly in the direction of the bridge. From the trees that lined the towing-path two men had emerged, and they were following him, with stealthy footsteps, crouching as they went.

The two juniors could see them clearly. They were slightly-built, active-looking men, with dark, swarthy faces that told of foreign blood. One, the taller of the two, had ear-rings in his ears, the glitter of which caught the sun. That they were stealing after the old man to attack him seemed certain; yet the audacity of such an attempt in the broad daylight, within sight of the Tower of St. Jim's, was

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"THE SCHOOLBOY EXPLORERS!" AND "DEEP SEA GOLD."

staggering. The Terrible Three could scarcely believe their eyes.

"My word!" said Manners. "Shout to him! Those two foreign bounders are going for him, as sure as a gun!"

"All together," exclaimed Tom Merry, "give him a yell!"

"Right-ho!"
The three juniors put their hands to their mouths and yelled:

"Hallo!"
The old gentleman started, as the loud shout rang across the river, and looked towards the juniors. And as his face was turned towards them the juniors recognised him. It was a face familiar enough at St. Jim's—the face of Sir Richard Standish, one of the governors of the school.

"Look out!" shouted Tom Merry. "Look behind you!"

The two foreigners had heard the yell also, and they stared across the river, and at once, realising that their intended victim was warned, they ran towards him, throwing further concealment to the winds. Sir Richard looked over his shoulder, and gave a start at the sight of the two swarthy faces within a dozen feet of him. He stood for a moment staring at them, and then broke into a run towards the bridge.

"Come on!" panted Tom Merry. "Run for the bridge! We may get to it, and across in time to lend him a hand. They're going for him.

"Right you are! Run for it!"

The three juniors—all signs of laziness gone now—raced along the riverside towards the bridge. If they could reach it and cross in time, they could join in the struggle that was certainly coming. For as the old gentleman ran, the two foreigners ran as well, and they ran faster. They were both young and active-men, and Sir Richard was not likely to have much chance if they reached him and he was unaided.

The Terrible Three ran as they had seldom run on the cinder-path. They reached the old stone bridge, and swung across it in fine style. On the other side of the river, Sir Richard Standish had reached the opposite end of the bridge, when the two swarthy-faced rascals were upon him.

The man with the ear-rings leaped upon him, dragging him backwards by the shoulders. Sir Richard, with a strength surprising in an old man, tore himself loose, and met the second man with a drive from his right arm that sent him staggering back. Then he dashed upon the bridge, shouting to the juniors for help.

But it was only for a moment that the two foreigners were checked. They dashed after the old gentleman, and fastened upon him together. Struggling fiercely with the two of them, Sir Richard was borne to the ground.

The man with the ear-rings knelt upon him, pinning him down, and grasping his wrists. He shouted to his comrade in a tongue strange to the ears of the juniors, but it was clear that he was giving an order, which the man instantly obeyed. His dusky hands went through the baronet's pockets with a quickness and sureness which showed that this was not the first man he had robbed. Such a daring robbery, in broad daylight upon a frequented bridge, showed the desperate character of the men. Tom Merry & Co. were less than a dozen yards away by this time, and coming on at tearing speed. They did not stop to think of the danger. They only thought of the old man in the grasp of the two foreign ruffians, and of helping him against his assailants.

"Quick!" panted Tom Merry.

"Help! Help!"

"We're coming, sir!"

"Carambo!" The man with the ear-rings panted out the Spanish word. "Carambo! Yanez!"

"Tengo!" gasped the other. "Yo le tengo!"

The man dragged an oblong, sealed packet from the baronet's pocket, tearing open his coat to get at it. The two foreigners sprang up from the fallen man just as the St. Jim's juniors ran up.

Sir Richard, panting, raised himself on his elbow.

"The packet!" he gasped. "They have robbed me! The packet!"

"Sir Richard—"

"The packet! Get it back! The packet!" gasped the baronet.

The Terrible Three passed him. The two foreigners, evidently having now what they had attacked the baronet to obtain, were running. But they had no chance of getting clear. The juniors were upon them. The man with the ear-rings had taken the packet from the other, and he was thrusting it into his breast as he ran for the woods. Tom Merry leaped upon him from behind and dragged him down, and the packet fell to the ground and rolled in the grass beside the stream.

The Spaniard—for such he evidently was—fell heavily, and Tom Merry fell upon him. Monty Lowther rolled over him.

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in his haste to catch hold, and crushed him to the earth. The other man turned to his aid, and met Manners full tilt. Manners and the second Spaniard fell together.

"The packet!" shouted the baronet, staggering to his feet.

Breathless as he was, he ran to the aid of the juniors. The two foreigners were up in a moment, struggling fiercely with the boys.

"Collar them!" gasped Tom Merry.

The man with the ear-rings tore himself loose, and ran towards the packet, as it lay in the grass. But Sir Richard was before him. The old gentleman seized the packet and thrust it into his coat, and faced the ear-ringed Spaniard. Before the ruffian could attack him, however, the juniors were upon him again.

"That's right, my lads!" panted Sir Richard. "Seize them! The scoundrels!"

The Spaniard fought fiercely, but he was fighting for his liberty row, not for the packet he had failed to obtain. Two or three St. Jim's juniors, who had sighted the struggle from a distance, were dashing across the bridge to the aid of the Shell fellows. The game was up as far as the two foreigners were concerned.

The ear-ringed ruffian dragged himself loose and ran for the woods, and the other rascal panted after him. They ran hard, and the Terrible Three ran after them. But the boys had been winded by the struggle. The two foreigners gained the wood, and disappeared into the trees.

Sir Richard shouted after the juniors:

"Come back! Come back!"

The Terrible Three paused on the edge of the wood. The two bootpads had disappeared, though, in the distance, the juniors could hear a crashing of underwood as they ran.

"Come back!" shouted Sir Richard.

And the chums of St. Jim's, panting, returned to the spot where Sir Richard stood.

CHAPTER 2.

The Man with the Ear-rings.

"BAI JOVE! What's the mattah, deah boys?"
Three juniors had come tearing over the bridge—Blake, Digby, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form. It was the last-named who asked the question. He jammed an eyeglass into his eye, and turned it alternately upon the gasping baronet and the Terrible Three. Tom Merry & Co. were red with exertion, but looking very pleased with themselves. They had baffled the thieves, and saved the sealed packet to which the baronet seemed to attach so much importance. They had reason to be pleased. Sir Richard leaned upon the stone parapet of the bridge, pale and tottering now that the excitement of the struggle was over.

"What's the mattah, Tom Mewwy? What?"

"Blessed if I know!" said Tom Merry. "Two foreign-looking bounders tried to rob Sir Richard, and we chipped in, that's all I know about it."

"And you saved the packet, my brave lads," gasped the baronet. "I shall not forget this. The packet is more valuable than you can imagine."

"I should think it was pretty valuable for those rotters to try to rob you of it in broad daylight, sir," said Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"They must have followed me from London," the baronet muttered. "I have been on my guard all the time. I thought I was watched in Wayland, and that was why I walked to St. Jim's instead of taking the local train." He was speaking rather to himself than to the juniors. "But they have been baffled—the packet is safe."

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy. "The uttah wottahs ought to be wun in, you know. Shall we follow them, sir, and capchah the wottahs?"

Sir Richard shook his head.

"No; they are clear away by now!"

"That's all right, sir! I could follow their tracks through the wood quite easily, sir," said the swell of St. Jim's. "I have had a great deal of pwactice as a scout, sir."

"Rats!" murmured Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"We're quite ready to try, sir," said Tom Merry. "And the six of us would be able to handle them easily enough."

"No, no! They are most likely armed."

"Bai Jove!"

"Pray walk with me to the school, in case they should return—though I hardly think that likely," said Sir Richard.

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"

The baronet crossed the bridge, the juniors keeping him company. It is probable that Sir Richard did not need the



"Great Scott! Look there, you chaps!" exclaimed Tom Merry suddenly. "That looks to me like highway robbery! Look across the river!" "My hat!" ejaculated Manners and Lowther together. (See Chapter 1.)

escort so much, as that he wanted to keep the juniors out of the danger of following the two swarthy ruffians into the wood.

The old gentleman panted painfully as he tramped over the bridge, and took the path through the trees towards the school. Over the trees, the grey old tower of St. Jim's rose into view. Arthur Augustus, who was famous for his politeness towards the old, offered Sir Richard his arm, and the old gentleman leaned upon the junior as he walked to the school.

Tom Merry & Co. followed, very much puzzled by what had occurred.

The mysterious packet puzzled and interested them. What could it contain, to make the two foreigners so bent upon obtaining it? It was hardly likely that Sir Richard Standish would be carrying about a package of money or jewellery or banknotes. Then what was in the packet? The juniors could not help feeling curious upon the subject.

They reached St. Jim's, and Sir Richard, after thanking the boys again for their timely assistance, went into the Head's house.

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remarked, polishing his eyeglass in a thoughtful sort of way. "I wegard this as a most remarkable occurrence. Those two boundahs ought to be awrested, you know."

"It's jolly odd," said Tom Merry. "They had a first-class nerve to tackle Sir Richard so near the school. There might have been a dozen people on the towing-path."

"It shows that they were pretty desperate," said Blake. "Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors strolled into the School House. It was growing dusk at St. Jim's; the old elm-trees were casting dim, lengthening shadows. The Terrible Three went up to their study in the Shell passage, and Tom Merry lighted the gas. It had been a half-holiday at St. Jim's, and the chums of the Shell were hungry after some hours out of doors.

But the thought of the two swarthy foreigners was still in Tom Merry's mind. He wondered whether they would have the temerity to watch the school for the departure of the baronet. Sir Richard had not gone yet, and the juniors guessed that he was staying to dinner with Dr. Holmes. Tom Merry rose from the tea-table presently, and crossed to the study window, and looked out into the quadrangle.

The circle of light from the windows and doorway of the old School House was cast in a wide radius into the shadowy quadrangle. Beyond the radius of light all was dark. The fellows were all indoors now, most of them in their studies or in the hall downstairs. The old quad. was deserted.

Tom Merry scanned the shadowy quad. Suddenly he gave a start. Into the radius of light before the house a figure

emerged, and Tom Merry caught a glimmer of a dusky face, a glitter of keen, black eyes, and golden ear-rings.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed.

Manners and Lowther started up from the tea-table as Tom Merry dashed towards the door.

"What is it, Tom?"

"The man with the ear-rings."

"Great Scott!"

"In the quad."

"Yes. Follow me!"

Tom Merry dashed downstairs. Manners and Lowther were after him in a twinkling. They ran out of the house.

Eat the dusky intruder was no longer in the light. Tom Merry stared into the shadows of the quadrangle. That the man with the ear-rings was within the school walls he was certain.

"Are you quite sure, Tom?" Manners muttered doubtfully.

"Quite sure."

"Let's look for him."

"Call up the other chaps," said Lowther. "Better have as many as possible in the search. We're more likely to lay him by the heels."

"You call them!" said Tom Merry.

And he ran into the shadows with Manners. A dark figure loomed up before him, and Tom Merry leaped upon it, and bore it to the earth.

"Got him!" he shouted.

There was a sound of something breaking. Manners piled on with Tom Merry, and the victim was crushed gasping to the earth. He struggled under the weight of the two juniors, uttering smothered gasps.

"Got him!" yelled Manners. "Bring a light!"

"This way!" roared Tom Merry.

There was a shout in reply from the direction of the School House. Monty Lowther dashed up with a bicycle lantern in his hand. Blake and D'Arcy and Digby and Reilly and Herries and a crowd more juniors followed him.

"Show a light here!" gasped Tom Merry.

"Groo!" came from the struggling victim.

"We've got him!"

"Ow!"

"Keep still, you rotter!"

"Yarooop!"

"Show the light!"

The excited juniors gathered round. Monty Lowther flashed the lantern upon the face of the prisoner as he lay struggling feebly under Tom Merry and Manners. The face was a round, fat one, with very plump cheeks.

"My hat!" gasped Monty Lowther. "Ha, ha, ha! Fatty Wynn!"

CHAPTER 3.

No Luck!

FATTY WYNN of the New House glared in breathless wrath at the School House fellows. Tom Merry and Manners stared at him in the light, and released him in sheer amazement. It was Fatty Wynn of the Fourth Form, there was no mistake about that. Tom Merry had evidently seized the wrong person in the darkness.

"Wynn!"

"Fatty Wynn!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Groo!"

"You fat duffer!" exclaimed Tom Merry wrathfully.

"What do you mean by it?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Lowther. "I think Fatty has a right to ask that question. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yaas, wathah! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Groo! Hooh! Oh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fatty Wynn sat up, still gasping. His Eton jacket was smothered with a brownish liquid, and fragments of broken china clung to him. Little pieces of steak and kidneys were scattered upon him and round him.

"Oh, you chumps!" panted Fatty Wynn. "You silly asses! You dangerous, burbling duffers! You've smashed the basin, and messed up the steak and kidney pudding. Oh, you asses!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's not a laughing matter!" exclaimed the fat Fourth-Former indignantly. "Look at that pudding! Done in! And look at the state of my clothes."

"Bai Jove, yaas! Look at the state of his clothes, deah boys. That's wathah wotten!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"How did it all happen?" demanded Jack Blake.

"It's all Fatty Wynn's fault," said Tom Merry wrathfully. "I saw one of those black-jowled chaps who tried to rob Sir Richard—I saw him from my study window, and came down to collar him. Then Fatty Wynn came by, pretending to be him."

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"I didn't!" roared Fatty Wynn. "I had just been to the tuck-shop to get tuis pudding, and Figgins and Kerr are waiting for it in my study, too."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Those two dangerous lunatics jumped on me in the dark, and pushed me over, and smashed the basin, and wrecked the pudding," said Fatty Wynn, almost tearfully.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! If you saw the wottah here, he must be here still, Tom Mewwy!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"We're wastin' time."

"Let's look for him!" exclaimed Kangaroo of the Shell.

"Hold on," said Herries hastily. "Wait till I fetch Towser. Towser'll smell him out, if he's here. Towser can track down anything."

"Especially kippers," said Blake.

"Oh, shut up! I'll fetch Towser."

And Herries rushed off for his bulldog. Herries had a persuasion that Towser partook of the qualities of a blood-hound, and nothing would ever get that idea out of his head. The juniors did not wait for the arrival of Towser. They spread themselves about the quad., looking for the Spaniard. Most of the School House fellows knew of the attempt that had been made to rob Sir Richard on the towing-path, and they were keenly interested in looking for the Spaniard. But there seemed to be no sign of the man with the ear-rings in the quad.

Fatty Wynn took his way disconsolately to the New House. He was not thinking of the man with the ear-rings, or of the mysterious packet the Spaniard was after. He was thinking of the steak-and-kidney pudding, ruthlessly destroyed, and he was going to acquaint Figgins and Kerr with the heavy loss. He entered Figgins's study in the New House with a weebecone visage that made his study-mates look at him in alarm.

"What's wrong?" demanded Figgins

"The pudding!"

"Where is it?"

"Gone!"

Kerr sniffed.

"You seem to have most of it about your clothes," he said. "Have you fallen over and broken the basin, you ass. I've got the baked potatoes all ready, and Figgy has made the toast. You fathead."

"Frabjous ass!" said Figgins.

"I didn't fall over," exclaimed Fatty Wynn indignantly.

"I was bumped over."

"Ass! School House row, I suppose!" grunted Figgins.

"I should think you might have kept clear of a house row when you were carrying a steak-and-kidney pudding. Rats!"

"It wasn't a house row!" roared Fatty Wynn, exasperated.

"Do you think I'm ass enough to risk losing a pudding if I could help it?"

"Well, it wouldn't be like you, Fatty," Figgins admitted.

"Tom Merry and another idiot bumped me over—took me for a burglar in the dark, or something!" growled Fatty Wynn. "The silly asses are searching for him in the quad., and they took me for him. The— Where are you going?"

But Figgins and Kerr were gone.

They dashed out of the house to see what was going on, and as soon as they learned, they joined in the search with great zest. Fatty Wynn was left in the study alone, to scrape the remains of the steak-and-kidney pudding from his waistcoat and trousers. When he had done that he looked out of the window to see what had become of Figgins and Kerr. He could not see them. Lights were flashing to and fro in the dusky quadrangle, and he made out the dim forms of juniors, and heard voices calling, but he could not distinguish the two New House fellows.

"Asses!" muttered Fatty Wynn. "Silly asses! The

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pudding's gone, but there's the toast and the taters. I'm not going to wait."

And Fatty Wynn sat down at the table before the pile of buttered toast and the baked potatoes, and the toast and potatoes vanished at record speed.

Meanwhile, the search went on in the quadrangle.

The news had soon spread that Tom Merry had seen in the quad, one of the ruffians who had attacked Sir Richard Standish, and fellows of both Houses, seniors and juniors, and masters as well, turned out to assist in the search.

With electric lamps, or bicycle lanterns, the fellows spread themselves over the quad., and almost every foot of the place was searched.

But the man with the ear-rings was not discovered. There was no trace of the Spaniard within the precincts of St. Jim's.

The search was abandoned at last.

If the Spaniard had been there he had escaped as soon as the search started; and, indeed, it was as easy for him to scale the school wall from the inner as from the outer side. If he had been there he was gone; but a great many of the fellows were inclined to believe that Tom Merry's imagination had played him a trick, and that the shadows in the dusky quadrangle had deceived him. It was hard to credit that the man, however desperate he was, would have ventured to follow Sir Richard within the walls of the school.

Sir Richard himself had come out to join the search, as soon as he knew what was going on, and his old face was very sombre as he went back into the Head's house. The others might doubt whether the Spaniard had been there; but Sir Richard did not. Tom Merry could tell that by a single glance at the baronet's face.

The juniors returned to their houses. Tom Merry with a very thoughtful frown upon his brow. The other fellows mostly thought that he had been mistaken; but Tom Merry did not think so himself, and he knew that the baronet did not think so. The man with the ear-rings had been within the walls of St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 4.

The Raiders.

FIGGINS and Kerr came into their study in the New House, looking tired and a little dusty. They had taken an active part in the search for the man with the ear-rings, and they had been among the last to give it up. The search had taken considerably more than an hour, and as tea had already been late, and Figgins and Kerr had not had time to eat anything, they came in with appetites worthy of Fatty Wynn himself. They were just in time to see the last morsel on the table disappearing into Fatty Wynn's mouth.

Wynn had made a general clearance. Toast and baked potatoes had vanished first, and then bread and butter and cheese had gone to help fill up the aching void. Then there were tarts and cake, and they followed, and finally Fatty Wynn cleaned out the jam-pot, with the remains of the last loaf to keep the jam company. He was still mourning the loss of the steak and kidney pudding, but he was doing his best to fill the blank. Save for crockery, the table was quite bare when Figgins and Kerr came in, as hungry as hunters. They glanced over the table.

"Hallo," said Figgins, "you've put the grub away, I see! Get it out, Fatty, there's a good fellow. I'm famished."

"Eh?" said Fatty, with a start.

He had certainly put the provisions away, but not in a place they could be extracted from again. Figgins, in his simplicity, imagined that they were in the cupboard. But Kerr knew better.

"You fat boulder!" he exclaimed wrathfully.

"Well, you see," said Fatty Wynn apologetically. "The steak and kidney pudding was done in, and I was hungry."

"You don't mean to say that you've scoffed all the tommy, you unearthly porpoise?" exclaimed Figgins, in amazement and dismay.

"I—I didn't mean to, exactly. But I always feel an extra keen appetite about this time of the year; there's something in the autumn air that makes me specially hungry," said Fatty Wynn feebly. "I—I meant to leave you some, but—somehow it all went. You see—"

"Yes, I see a prize porker!" said Figgins indignantly. "What are we to do now? Funds are all out. You blued the last on that pudding that you lost."

"I didn't lose it, I—"

"Well, it was lost," said Figgins. "Look here, what are we going to do? I'm hungry."

"Well, it was the School House rotters that busted the pudding," said Fatty Wynn. "And I know Tom Merry is in funds. I dare say he has a feed going, and—"

"Good. I feel just fit for a raid—"

"I didn't mean a raid. Might not get any grub, after all,"

said Fatty Wynn. "I—I mean, if we explain to him, you see—"

"Rats! We'll raid him if you like."

"Come on," said Kerr.

Fatty Wynn hesitated. He was quite ready for another meal—he always was. But with a heavy cargo of toast and potatoes and jam on board, he did not feel much inclined for the exertion of a raid. But he could not refuse to follow his leader. He rose from the armchair with a sigh, and followed Figgins and Kerr downstairs.

It was a favourable moment for raiding the School House, for the place was in a buzz with the excitement of the hunt for the ear-ringed man, and in the excitement and confusion the three New House juniors passed unnoticed into the School House. They marched coolly upstairs to the Shell passage, and Figgins pushed open the door of Tom Merry's study. The study was dark within, showing that the Terrible Three were not there.

"What luck!" murmured Figgins. "Nobody at home! When Tom Merry gets here, the cupboard will be bare, and the poor dog will have none! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Quiet!" murmured Kerr. "I can hear Gore in the next study."

Figgins closed the door softly, and lighted the gas, turning it on just sufficiently to show light for the raid. The three New House juniors were grinning gleefully. Tom Merry's study was at their mercy, and it was only a question of getting away with the plunder after they had carried out the raid. The cupboard was locked, which showed that there was something of value in the eating line inside. But a cupboard locked was not likely to baffle Fourth-Form raiders long.

Raids of this sort were common enough between juniors of the rival Houses at St. Jim's, and it was understood on both sides that all was fair in war. Figgins burst the lock with the aid of the study poker with a crash that ran along the Shell passage, and Kerr ran to the study door and listened. But the crash had not drawn any special attention to the study. Crashes and bangs were not infrequent in the Shell studies.

The cupboard door flew open, and Fatty Wynn gave a fat chuckle of delight. On the shelves were arrayed several paper bags containing pastries, and there was a steak and kidney pudding in a basin, precisely similar to the one that had been distributed over Fatty Wynn's waistcoat and trousers earlier in the evening. Those steak and kidney puddings were chefs-d'œuvre of Mrs. Taggles, and she had many customers for them.

The Terrible Three had laid in one for their evening meal, and, doubtless, as soon as the excitement below was over, they would come up to partake of it. That they had had their tea made no difference. As a rule, the juniors ate when they had provisions, not specially when it was a meal-time. And Dame Taggles's steak and kidney puddings might have tempted an anchorite to break through his rules.

"My word!" said Fatty Wynn. "This is really like poetical justice, isn't it? It's fate, you know. Steak and kidneys! My hat!"

"Collar it!" said Figgins.

"What-ho!"

"I'll take these bags of tarts. My hat, the boulders are doing themselves down well, and no mistake!" said Figgins. "Look at the table. They've had pork-pies and jam-tarts for tea, and cake. I don't approve of this blessed gluttony. As a matter of principle, we ought to take these things away."

"Of course, we ought," said Kerr. "I'll carry these bags of oranges and nuts. I think very likely oranges and nuts would be bad for them."

"Very likely. Come on. We don't want to be caught here."

The raiders turned towards the door with their plunder. But it was too late; there was a tramp of footsteps in the passage. Figgins halted.

"Blow the luck! Here they come!"

"We shall have to rush them!" muttered Kerr.

"Ready, then!"

Tom Merry threw open the door of the study. He seemed surprised to see the light. Manners and Lowther were just behind him.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Why, what—"

"Look out!" yelled Lowther.

Figgins & Co. made a rush.

They dashed right into the Terrible Three. Manners was bowled over, and Kerr rushed past him and gained the passage. Figgins and Lowther closed and rolled together on the floor.

Tom Merry seized the pudding in Fatty Wynn's hands. Fatty could easily have escaped by letting Tom Merry keep the pudding; but he would almost as soon have let Tom Merry keep his head. He dragged at the pudding, and Tom Merry dragged at it, and wrenched it away.

Fatty Wynn grasped him, and began to punch; and Tom Merry had to let the pudding go to defend himself. The

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pudding slid down his chest and burst, and steak and kidneys and brown gravy ran all over Tom Merry.

"You—you fat burglar!" he gasped. "Oh!"

"Oh, the pudding!"

"Oh, you boulder!"

"Oh, the pudding! The pud—ow!"

Kerr turned back in the passage as he saw his comrades hotly engaged. He could have got quite clear; but, of course, he could not escape without his comrades. He ran back, and plastered jam-tarts over Tom Merry's face till, blinded and half-dazed, the hero of the Shell released Fatty Wynn. Fatty Wynn, gasping breathlessly, staggered down the passage, and Tom Merry reeled away gouging at the jam in his eyes. Manners was sitting up dazedly, and Kerr pushed him over, and then dragged Monty Lowther away from Figgins.

There was loud alarm all along the passage now—Gore, and Kangaroo, and Dane and Glyn were rushing out—and Blake's voice could be heard in the Fourth-Form passage. There was nothing but flight left for the raiders, and they fled. They dashed downstairs at top speed, upsetting several juniors who tried to stop them, and dashed out into the quadrangle.

"Buzz for it!" gasped Figgins.

"Oh, the pudding!"

"Haven't you got the pudding?"

"Ow! It's smashed—all over Tom Merry!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The three raiders fled across the quadrangle in the darkness. Their raid had not succeeded from a point of view of plunder, but they had given the School House fellows a stirring time, at all events. In the Shell passage, Monty Lowther was sitting on the floor, and rubbing several bumps on his head, and Manners was gasping for breath with a sound like air escaping from a big puncture. Tom Merry staggered into one of the studies, gouging jam off his face, and crumbs of pastry from his eyes and nose. He presented a spectacle that evoked roars of laughter from the juniors as they came crowding on the scene.

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remarked, as he turned his eyeglass upon the hero of the Shell. "Bai Jove! I regard you as a gweedy boundah, Tom Mewwy, to go for your gwub in that way! You are simply smothahed."

"Ow! Groo!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Knox, of the Sixth, came pushing his way through the crowd of juniors. Knox was a prefect, and a most ill-tempered one, and he was seldom seen to smile except when he was caning somebody. But he burst into a roar at the sight of Tom Merry.

"Ha, ha, ha! Is that you, Merry? Ha, ha, ha!"

"Grooch!"

"The Head wants to see you!" grinned Knox. "The Head and Sir Richard Standish. You are to go to them at once."

"Bai Jove!"

Tom Merry jumped.

"A-a-all right," he gasped. "I—I'll come in a minute. I shall have to get a wash first—"

"Can't be did!" said Knox coolly. "You'll come as you are. The Head said at once, and I can't allow you to disobey his orders."

"But look at me, Knox. You see—"

"Come on."

"I—I can't go like this. I—"

"The Head said you were to come at once. He's in his study with Sir Richard. You will come just as you are. Come on."

"But—"

"Come!"

There was no gainsaying the prefect. Tom Merry, dabbling frantically at the jam and the gravy with a handkerchief that already seemed more gravy and jam than handkerchief, followed the prefect disconsolately, wondering what Dr. Holmes would think of him when he saw him.

CHAPTER 5.

A Task for Tom Merry!

DR. HOLMES, the Head of St. Jim's, was seated in his study. There was a bright fire burning in the grate, for the autumn evening was cold. Sir Richard Standish was sitting in an arm-chair, with his feet on the fender, and a cigar in his mouth. The baronet had dined with the Head, and he was staying at St. Jim's that night, and the two old gentlemen had retired to the Head's study for a talk. On the table lay an oblong sealed packet—the packet which the two Spaniards had made such a desperate attempt to wrest from Sir Richard.

Sir Richard was speaking, and Dr. Holmes was listening with an intent look upon his face, evidently much interested in what the baronet was saying—interested, but dubious.

"It would be a pleasant little excursion for the boy, sir," said Sir Richard, taking his cigar from his mouth, and looking

at the doctor through a cloud of blue smoke, "and I cannot see that there would be any danger. If I thought he would be going into danger, I would not suggest anything of the sort for a moment. But it is for the precise purpose of eliminating the element of danger that I suggest entrusting the task to Tom Merry."

Dr. Holmes nodded.

"Quite so," he said. "If you will explain exactly—"

"The case stands like this," said Sir Richard. "This packet has to be taken out to the West Coast of Africa—and taken intact. It contains information for a certain person there—information that may lead to great things for myself and for other parties concerned. It is all a dead secret at present, but I may tell you that it concerns a new discovery in the rubber trade—a discovery that may cause an excitement in the rubber market far greater than the last boom. If our rivals succeed in getting hold of the secret contained in that packet, if they once had the papers and the map sealed up there, they could forestall us. And as they are desperate and unscrupulous men, accustomed to the lawless ways of the Gold Coast, I know perfectly well that they will stop at nothing."

"Certainly what happened to-day seems to indicate as much," the Head assented.

"Several desperate attempts have been made in London, and the last was made to-day," the baronet went on. "If I sent a special messenger with this packet he would be waylaid and robbed. The scoundrels have money, and I am certain that they would go so far as to charter a vessel and stop a steamer on the high seas by force if they knew that this packet was going out by any steamer."

"Bless my soul!"

"The only thing is to keep it a dead secret—to conceal which vessel is taking the packet out, to avoid letting even the captain know what he is doing until he is out at sea and has cut off all communication with land. We have chartered a steamer, now lying at Southampton, and that fact has been kept a secret. The captain has instructions to remain ready for sea at any moment, but not to sail until he receives a certain packet. When he receives it he is to open the outer cover, which will give him his immediate instructions. When he has been two days at sea he is to take off the next cover, which will reveal to him his destination. He will, in fact, sail under sealed orders, and until the steamer is two days from England not a man on board will know where she is going."

"That should certainly make all secure."

The baronet blew out a cloud of smoke and nodded with satisfaction.

"Yes, I think that will baffle the rascals. Certainly not a word can leak out from anybody on board the steamer. The rascals will be watching all vessels for the West Coast that I have any connection with; but the steamer I am speaking of has lately returned from America, and is supposed to be preparing to return to New York. The skipper himself believes that he is going to New York. All is safe in that quarter. But there is one point we cannot guard. If a messenger takes the packet down to the steamer he will be watched, and the steamer will be followed at sea if the Spaniards have no chance to get at the man on shore."

"You mean that all your movements are watched—"

"Exactly! I have been under surveillance ever since I was first interested in this new rubber territory."

"But the post—"

Sir Richard laughed.

"I should be hardly likely to entrust a secret worth a million pounds to the chances of the post-office," he said.

"A million pounds!" said the Head, in a deep breath.

"Yes, and more than that."

"I suppose it would hardly be safe."

"Scarcely!"

The old gentleman smoked in silence for some minutes. The curtains at the window rustled in the breeze from the quadrangle. The window, as always, was open a few inches at the top, and the rustle of the thick ivy in the breeze could be heard in the study. Outside, all was dark and deeply shadowed in the old quad.

"Well," said the baronet, throwing his cigar-end in the fire at last, "now you see my idea. I cannot post such a thing to the steamer; I cannot send anybody who will not be watched. But if a schoolboy leaves St. Jim's and takes a train at Rylcombe, who is to suspect that his destination is Southampton and that he carries a packet in his pocket addressed to the captain of the Opossum?"

ANSWERS

"THE SCHOOLBOY OUTLAWS!"

is the Title of the Splendid, Complete School Tale of Harry Wharton & Co. appearing in this week's "MAGNET" Library. Now on Sale. One Penny.



Tom Merry presented a spectacle that evoked roars of laughter from the juniors. "Bai Jove!" remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I wegard you as a gwedy boundah, Tom Merry, to go for your gwub in that way! You are simply smothahed!" (See page 6.)

"That is true!"

"The thought came into my mind while I was thinking it out," said Sir Richard. "As I am a governor of St. Jim's, it occurred to me to ask your permission to send one of your boys to Southampton with the packet. It will be a pleasant little run for him, and cannot possibly lead to harm. Upon the whole, I should select a junior boy as less likely to attract any attention. Tom Merry is a sensible lad, and just the one I should select. As it happens, he aided me this afternoon when I was attacked by the Spaniards, and showed very great courage."

"He is a brave lad, and a sensible one," said the Head. "Then your idea is—"

"To let him leave the school simply as if he were going out in the ordinary way. He will take the local train to Wayland, and at Wayland he will catch the express for Southampton. There he will go on board the Opossum, and deliver this packet to the captain."

"It seems very simple."

"It is simplicity itself. The lad is to be trusted, and he knows how to hold his tongue," said Sir Richard. "If, however, you have any objection, doctor, say so, and I will think of another plan for sending the packet to Southampton."

"Not at all! I see no danger in the plan," said Dr.

Holmes. "It only remains to see Tom Merry and tell him what is required."

"You are agreeable, then?"

"Oh, quite!"

"Then send for Merry."

Dr. Holmes touched a bell, and as soon as Toby, the page, appeared he directed him to send Tom Merry to the study.

But minutes passed on, and Tom Merry did not come. As a matter of fact, the hero of the Shell was then still out in the quadrangle, searching for the man with the earrings.

Dr. Holmes stepped to the door of the study and looked out into the passage. Knox, the prefect, was passing, and the Head called to him.

"Find Tom Merry and bring him here at once, Knox, please," he said.

"Certainly, sir!" said Knox.

The prefect went cheerfully on his errand. He imagined that some punishment was in store for Tom Merry, and he was very pleased to send him in to the Head for that purpose.

Dr. Holmes returned to his seat.

"I dare say the lad is still busy," said Sir Richard, with a smile. "The Spaniard has certainly been here this evening, doctor."

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it. After attacking me, they must have

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A Splendid, New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry. By MARTIN GIBSON.

tracked me here, and they are watching to know whether I leave."

"And when you leave?"

"I shall be followed." The baronet chuckled softly.

"But it will not matter if a junior of St. Jim's has already departed for Southampton with the packet in his charge."

The Head smiled.

"If they follow you back to London they will certainly be thrown right off the track," he said. "I think it is an excellent plan, and Tom Merry is certainly a lad to be trusted. Ah, here he is, I have no doubt!"

There was a tap at the door, and Knox looked in.

"Here is Tom Merry, sir."

"Thank you, Knox! Tell him to come in."

"Go in, Merry."

"I say, Knox—"

"Go in at once!"

The hero of the Shell entered.

"Ah, Merry, I have— Good heavens!"

Dr. Holmes jumped up from his chair at the sight of the Shell fellow. Sir Richard stared at him in equal surprise.

Tom Merry certainly presented a strange sight—his clothes covered with pudding and gravy, his face plastered with pastry, and his eyes blinking through smears of jam.

His face was crimson where it showed through the plaster of pastry.

"Merry—what—what—" gasped the Head.

CHAPTER 6.

The Junior's Trust.

TOM MERRY stood crimson and dumb.

The Head gazed at him, and Sir Richard gazed at him. Knox, as he closed the door and slipped silently down the passage, chuckled softly. He had obeyed the Head's orders to the letter—he had brought Tom Merry to Dr. Holmes at once. It was no business of his if the hero of the Shell was in no state to appear before the Head. That was a matter which concerned Tom Merry only.

"Merry!"

"Begad!" ejaculated Sir Richard. "Begad!"

"Merry, how dare you appear in my study in this state?" exclaimed the Head.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Sir Richard.

"Merry, this—this impertinence—"

"I—I couldn't help it, sir," stammered Tom Merry.

"Knox said you wanted to see me at once, sir, so there was no time to— to change, sir."

"But how did you come to be in this—this disgusting state?" exclaimed the Head.

"It was a—a—an—"

"An accident, of course?" gasped Sir Richard. "Accidents will happen in junior studies, Dr. Holmes. I remember that from the time I was a fag at St. Jim's, begad! Ha, ha, ha!"

The Head's frown changed into a smile. He realised that Tom Merry would not have appeared before him in that state if he could possibly have helped it.

Tom Merry ruefully gouged jam out of his eyes and blinked at the doctor and the baronet. He was feeling exceedingly uncomfortable.

"Well, well," said Dr. Holmes, "go and get yourself into a cleaner state at once, Merry, and then come back here as soon as you can. I have something very important to say to you, but I cannot talk to you while you are in that state."

"I—I'm very sorry, sir—"

"Very well, very well!"

Tom Merry quitted the Head's study. Then the Head allowed himself to laugh. He gave a sudden start, and looked round towards the window. The ivy was scratching against the panes in the night breeze.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Dr. Holmes, in surprise. "Was that an echo?"

"Was what an echo?" asked Sir Richard.

"I certainly thought I heard the sound of a laugh—or, rather, a chuckle," said the Head, looking towards the window. "I suppose it was only an echo."

Sir Richard laughed.

"There could hardly be anybody at the window, sir," he said. "I believe it is a great height from the ground."

"Twenty feet, at least."

The baronet rose, suddenly becoming very serious. The thought of the man with the ear-rings had flashed into his mind.

"Begad!" he exclaimed. "It's possible—not likely—but possible—"

He did not finish, but ran to the window and dragged the blind aside. He looked out. There was a glimmer of starlight on the branches of the old elms, but the quadrangle was very dusky. There was no trace of anyone to be seen.

Sir Richard drew a breath of relief.

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"What were you thinking of, Sir Richard?" asked the Head, in surprise.

The baronet laughed rather uneasily.

"Well, when you spoke, the thought came into my mind that that confounded Spaniard might have climbed to the window and listened to what we have been saying," he replied. "Of course, it is impossible."

The Head smiled.

"Quite!" he said. "He has been searched for too thoroughly to be still within the school walls. I don't think you need have any uneasiness on that score, Sir Richard."

"No, I suppose not. But the thought of that man haunts me," said the baronet, dropping the blind into its place and resuming his seat. "Juan Rodriguez is a desperate rascal, and I am prepared for anything when I am dealing with him. But, as you say, it is impossible."

The baronet lighted a fresh cigar. By the time it was half finished Tom Merry had returned to the study.

Tom Merry had changed his clothes and washed off the plaster of jam and pastry, and looked decidedly the better for the change.

"You may sit down, Merry," said the Head.

"Thank you, sir!"

"Sir Richard Standish wishes to entrust an important commission to you, Merry," said Dr. Holmes. "You are at liberty to undertake it or not, as you please. If you do not care to do so Sir Richard will not be in the least offended. It will necessitate a journey to Southampton."

Tom Merry's eyes danced. He was not likely to decline to undertake any commission which promised him a run out of school and a visit to a seaport.

"I shall be very glad to do it, sir, whatever it is," he said eagerly.

Dr. Holmes smiled.

"Please explain to him, then, Sir Richard," he said.

"Certainly." The baronet removed his cigar from his lips. "Merry, you acted in a very plucky manner to-day, and showed great presence of mind—"

"Oh, sir!"

"That is partly my reason for selecting you; but, also, I have observed you before, and I think you are a sensible and reliable lad," said the baronet. "I want this packet taken to Southampton, and delivered into the hands of the skipper of the Opossum, now lying in harbour there. No one is to see the packet, and no one to know that you have it upon you. You are to observe the greatest secrecy, and at the same time, to keep up an appearance of having no secret whatever. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"You will leave the school in the morning, as if merely strolling down to the village. In Rylcombe you will take the local train for Wayland. At Wayland you will take the express for Southampton. You will understand, of course, that the man who tries to rob me to-day—Juan Rodriguez, the Spaniard with the ear-rings—will be on the watch for me when I leave the school, and will make another attempt to seize the packet. I need not explain to you what it contains, but it is of the utmost importance. Now, I hope to lead those rascals on my track back to London, and, meanwhile, you will deliver the packet in perfect safety. There is no danger whatever, as the scoundrels will not, naturally, have the least suspicion of a schoolboy."

"Quite so, sir."

"Well, do you feel inclined to undertake the task?"

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"Then Dr. Holmes will excuse you from lessons to-morrow, for the purpose."

"Certainly, sir," said the Head.

"May I make a suggestion, sir?" asked Tom Merry diffidently.

"Undoubtedly."

"Suppose, sir, that I took a few friends with me? That would make it all the safer, in case the Spaniards should by any chance get on the track, and, besides, we could go out with lunch baskets, as if we were going on a picnic, and instead of going by train to Wayland, we could stroll there through the woods."

"By Jove! A good idea!"

Dr. Holmes smiled a little dubiously. He quite understood that Tom Merry was willing to give the "Co." a chance of sharing his little run.

"But that would make it necessary to tell others about it," the Head remarked.

"I need not tell them anything, sir," said Tom Merry eagerly, "only that I have a day off, with permission to take them. I need not tell them we are going to Southampton till we get to Wayland Junction. They would be sailing under sealed orders."

Sir Richard laughed.

"I think it's a good idea, Dr. Holmes, if you will give Tom Merry's friends permission to go with him," he said.

The doctor nodded.

"Very well," he said, "you have permission, Merry, since Sir Richard thinks it is a good idea. You will leave the school, of course, without any appearance of preparation for a journey."

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"And, mind, mum's the word," said Sir Richard.

"Yes, sir."

"Don't say a word on the subject till to-morrow morning," added the baronet. "Your friends can wait for information till then."

"Very well, sir."

"There, I think that is settled," said Sir Richard. "You may go, my boy, and I am very much obliged to you."

And Tom Merry left the Head's study. He returned to his own room, with a very pleased expression on his face. Like any other schoolboy, he enjoyed the prospect of a run out of bounds, and freedom from lessons for a day.

Monty Lowther and Manners were waiting for him in his study in the Shell passage. Both of them were very curious to know what the Head had wanted him for so urgently. But Tom Merry had no information to give.

"What was it?" asked Manners.

"A licking?" queried Monty Lowther.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"I suppose the Head wanted to see you for something, as he sent for you!" exclaimed Manners.

"Well, yes."

"Then what was it?"

"I'll tell you to-morrow."

"Eh?"

"Getting deaf?" asked Tom Merry pleasantly. "I'll tell you to-morrow what the Head wanted. Let's get on with our prep."

"Rats! What did the Head want?"

"I'll tell you to-morrow—"

"You'll jolly well tell us now, or you'll jolly well get bumped," said Monty Lowther warmly. "What did you mean, you cheeky beggar. What did he want?"

"I'll tell you to—"

"Are you going to tell us?" demanded Lowther.

"Yes—to-morrow."

"Oh, bump him!" said Manners.

"Here, hands off— Oh!"

Monty Lowther and Manners did not keep their hands off. They grasped Tom Merry, and slammed him up against the wall of the study. They held him pinned there, while Lowther repeated his question.

"Now, then, are you going to tell us?"

"No!"

Bump! Bump!

Tom Merry was bumped heavily against the wall. He roared and struggled, and the Terrible Three went in a heap to the floor. For some moments nothing was visible but arms and legs whirling wildly. Then Tom Merry was on his back on the carpet, and Manners and Lowther were sitting on him.

"What did the Head want you for?" roared Manners.

"Rats!"

"Are you going to tell us?"

"No!"

Bump him!"

And the hero of the Shell was bumped on the carpet, till the dust rose in clouds. But he did not speak a word.

"Now, then, are you going to talk?"

"No!" gasped Tom Merry.

Bump! Bump!

"Now, then—"

"Go and eat coke!"

And Manners and Lowther gave it up.

CHAPTER 7.

A Few Friends.

TOM MERRY did not say a word on the subject until the morrow morning, much to the disgust of his chums of the Shell. When he went out into the quadrangle before breakfast in the morning, he met Sir Richard taking an early stroll, and the baronet beckoned to him.

"Have you told anybody yet?" he asked.

Tom Merry smiled.

"Not yet, sir."

"Good lad!"

Manners and Lowther scowled when Tom Merry came in to breakfast. Tom Merry gave them serene smiles. He knew that the information he had to give would soon change frowns into grins of gladness.

"You young bounder!" growled Lowther. "Are you still keeping up the giddy mystery?"

"I'll tell you after brekker."

And after breakfast, under the elms in the old quad., Tom Merry imparted the weighty secret, so far as he was allowed to do so by the arrangement with Sir Richard. Manners and Lowther listened with surprise.

"You've got a day off?" repeated Manners.

"Yes."

"And you're going on a picnic?"

"Yes."

"And can take your friends with you?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's jolly good, anyway," said Monty Lowther; "But I'm blessed if I understand."

"That's not necessary," said Tom Merry sweetly. "You follow your leader, and don't ask questions, and everything in the garden will be lovely. It's something to have a day off from lessons, isn't it?"

"Oh, that's all right; I'm on!"

"I'll take my camera out for a run," said Manners thoughtfully. "It's a fine bright day, and I can get some good negatives, I think."

"Good!"

"Is the number limited—the number of the fellows you can take, I mean?" said Monty Lowther.

Tom Merry grinned.

"No; the number's not fixed," he said. "I said a few friends—"

"A few might mean any number," said Lowther. "It would be only cricket to give Blake & Co. a little run."

"Let's ask them."

Blake and his friends of the Fourth Form were talking in a group in the quad., while they waited for the bell to summon them to morning classes. The Terrible Three strolled up to them with their sweetest smiles. The Shell fellows were feeling in an excellent temper with themselves and everybody else that morning.

"You fellows like a day's holiday?" asked Tom Merry airily.

"Bai Jove! Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"All right, I'll give you one," said Tom Merry.

"Weally, deah boy—"

"Don't come here talking out of the back of your head, my son," said Jack Blake warningly. "you're liable to get a thick ear."

"I mean it."

"Oh, come off!" said Digby.

"Honest Injun!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Herries. "How can you get us a day's holiday?"

"Yaas, wathah; explain yourself, deah boy."

"I've got permission to have a day out, and take my friends," said Tom Merry. "You chaps are friends of mine, I suppose."

"Honest Injun?"

"Yes."

Blake fell into his arms and hugged him.

"Friends of yours—I should jolly well say so!" he exclaimed. "I'm the bosom chum of any chap who can get me a day's holiday. Hurrah!"

"Huwwah!"

"Bravo!" said Digby. "I'll come—rather!"

Herries looked very thoughtful.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I couldn't come away for a whole day. Towser isn't well."

"Oh, blow Towser!"

"It's all Digby's fault. I gave him some sausages Dig had for tea, and they didn't agree with Towser. Towser has never been the same dog since."

"Well, I got the sosses for myself, not for Towser," said Dig. "It was like your thundering cheek giving them to Towser."

"I had run out of his usual prog," said Herries, as if that explained everything. "Towser seemed to like the sossingers. But he's never been himself since."

"Cannibalism," said Monty Lowther solemnly. "Towser may have unconsciously devoured a near relation, and you know that relations never agree at close quarters."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I've got to keep an eye on Towser," said Herries, "otherwise, I should be jolly glad. It's a pity. If you fellows would like to lend me a hand, and carry Towser along with us in a basket. I could manage it."

Tom Merry laughed.

"I don't think that could be fixed," he said. "We shall have to go on the railway."

"That settles it; Towser doesn't like railways. Couldn't we possibly go on foot, or in a trap of some kind, instead?"

"Ha, ha, ha! No!"

"Well, I'm sorry. If you fellows will excuse me, I'll go and have another look at Towser before lessons."

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And Herries walked away. D'Arcy turned his eyeglass upon his departing chum, and shook his head seriously.

"I weally cannot understand Hewwies' attachment to that howwid beast," he said. "Towsah has no respect whatevah for a fellow's twousahs. Anybody else comin' besides us, Tom Mewwy, deah boy?"

"I haven't asked anybody else yet," said Tom Merry. "Might take Figgins & Co. along. It would be heaping coals of fire on their heads, after their raiding us last night."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Fatty Wynn could arrange the lunch, if we're going to picnic," said Monty Lowther. "He's a good hand at that."

"Good! We'll ask them."

Figgins & Co. were in their study, looking out of the window, and the School House fellows soon spotted them. They strolled over to the New House, and called up to the window. Kerr disappeared from the window, while Figgins and Fatty Wynn grinned down at the chums of the School House.

"You fellows like a holiday?" called out Tom Merry.

"What do you think?" said Figgins. "You fellows like a steak-and-kidney pudding? Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Fatty Wynn.

Kerr reappeared at the window. He had his right hand behind him.

"Warm to-day, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes, rather—oh! Ooch!"

Kerr's hands came from behind his back suddenly, and there was a swish, as a bucket of water descended upon the heads of the School House juniors.

"That will cool you," Kerr remarked.

And Figgins & Co. roared.

"You—you unspeakable wottahs!" yelled D'Arcy, taking off his silk hat, and looking at it in dismay. "You have wuined my toppah, bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You asses!" yelled Tom Merry. "We came over here to do you a good turn." He wiped the water out of his eyes. "You silly chumps!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you burbling jabberwocks!" snorted Monty Lowther. "You—you—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! Let's go up and have them out!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I will give that howwid boundah Kerr a feahful thwashin'." I—

"Hold on," said Tom Merry, laughing. "Look here, Figgy, it's honest Injun. I've got permission to go out for the day and take a few friends—"

"My hat!" exclaimed Figgins.

"We want you to come."

"Phew! Kerr, you ass, why did you chuck that water over our best friends in the world?" demanded Figgins warmly.

"How was I to know?" demanded Kerr in his turn.

"But it's all right—they can consider the water not chucked."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come down, you duffers, and don't play the giddy goat," said Blake.

"Right-ho, we'll come!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, after Kerr's outrageous conduct, I insist upon givin' him a feahful thwashin'!"

"My dear Gussy!"

"I insist—"

"Kerr is our guest to-day," said Monty Lowther, with great gravity. "I trust that D'Arcy will not persist in showing rudeness to a guest."

"Bai Jove, if you put it like that, Lowthah, deah boy—"

"Well, I do."

"Certainly," said Tom Merry gravely.

"Then I will say nothin' more about the mattah," said the swell of St. Jim's graciously.

And when Figgins & Co. joined the School House fellows, all was serene, and the juniors were soon making schemes for the day's outing. Fatty Wynn, needless to say, was entrusted with the important task of preparing the lunch-baskets.

CHAPTER 8. The Expedition.

TOM MERRY was called into the Head's study just before morning school. He found Sir Richard there, and the baronet was in high good humour. He was very much relieved at the prospect of so safely getting rid of his dangerous charge. The more he thought about his plan, the better he liked it. A party of schoolboys starting out from school, apparently for a picnic, surely would not arouse the suspicions of even the Spaniard. So the baronet thought, at all events, and undoubtedly he was right, unless Juan Rodriguez had got wind of the scheme. And Sir Richard did not think that possible.

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"THE SCHOOLBOY OUTLAWS!"

is the Title of the Splendid, Complete School Tale of Harry Wharton & Co. appearing in this week's "MAGNET" Library. Now on Sale. One Penny.

"You are ready, Merry?" the Head asked.

"Quite ready, sir."

"You have chosen a few friends to go with you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. Sir Richard will give you your instructions."

The baronet drew the mysterious packet from his coat, and handed it to Tom Merry.

"Put it in an inside pocket," he said. "Take every care of that, Merry. It has a value greater than you can possibly understand. You saw how determined those rascals were to obtain possession of it yesterday."

"I will be very careful, sir."

"You need not mention to the other boys that you have it; better keep the knowledge of it to yourself," said the baronet. "Unless, of course, in the unlikely event of your being attacked. That is, of course, practically impossible. If I believed that there was the slightest chance of it I should never allow you to become mixed up in the affair at all. You will require money for your expenses. How many friends are you taking?"

Tom Merry coughed.

"Eight, sir," he said.

"Ahem!" said the Head.

"If—you think that's too many, sir—" faltered Tom Merry.

"Never mind," said the Head good-humouredly. "Give me their names, so that I can inform their Form-masters, that is all."

"Lowther, Manners, Blake, Digby, D'Arcy, Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty—I—I mean Wynn, sir."

The Head wrote down the names.

"Very well, Merry."

"Nine in all," said Sir Richard. "Very well, and you must allow me to stand the lunch you will take with you, and any little expenses that crop up."

"You are very good, sir."

"Here are five five-pound notes," said Sir Richard. "If you find the expenses run to a larger sum, you will let me know."

"Oh, that will be heaps, sir."

"And you will take every care of the packet, Merry?"

"Yes, rather, sir."

The baronet gave Tom Merry his final instructions, and the hero of the Shell listened patiently and attentively. Then Sir Richard shook hands with him, and so did the Head, and he took his leave. He seemed to be walking on air as he went down the passage. At that moment he was far from dreaming what his strange task was to lead to.

The juniors were waiting for him at the end of the passage. Fatty Wynn had a large lunch basket in each hand, and a beatific smile upon his plump face.

"All serene?" asked Figgins, as Tom Merry came up.

"All serene," replied Tom Merry cheerfully.

"Good! Let's get off, then."

"I've got three of the steak-and-kidney puddings, cold," said Fatty Wynn in an ecstatic whisper, as they walked out into the quad.

"Oh, good!" said Tom Merry, laughing.

The bell was ringing for classes. Tom Merry & Co. walked airily across the quad towards the gates, with a proud disregard for classes. Taggles, the school porter, was at the gates, and he regarded them with astonishment.

"Which it's no time for you to be going out, sirs," he said. "You'll be 'auled over the coals if you break bounds now. I shall report yer."

"Report away, my son," said Figgins.

And the juniors marched out, leaving the school porter considerably astonished. They did not take the road to Rylcombe. Tom Merry led the way in the opposite direction, and they took a footpath through the wood.

Tom Merry kept his eyes open for the Spaniards, but there was no sign of them. It was very probable that they were lurking about the school, watching for the departure of the baronet. Tom Merry grinned at the idea of their following Sir Richard to London, while the packet was on its way to Southampton.

"I suppose we'd better picnic in the woods," Fatty Wynn remarked, looking about him. "I know some jolly nice places here."

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Not yet, my son."

"May as well have a snack—"

"Rats!"

"Where are we going, then?"

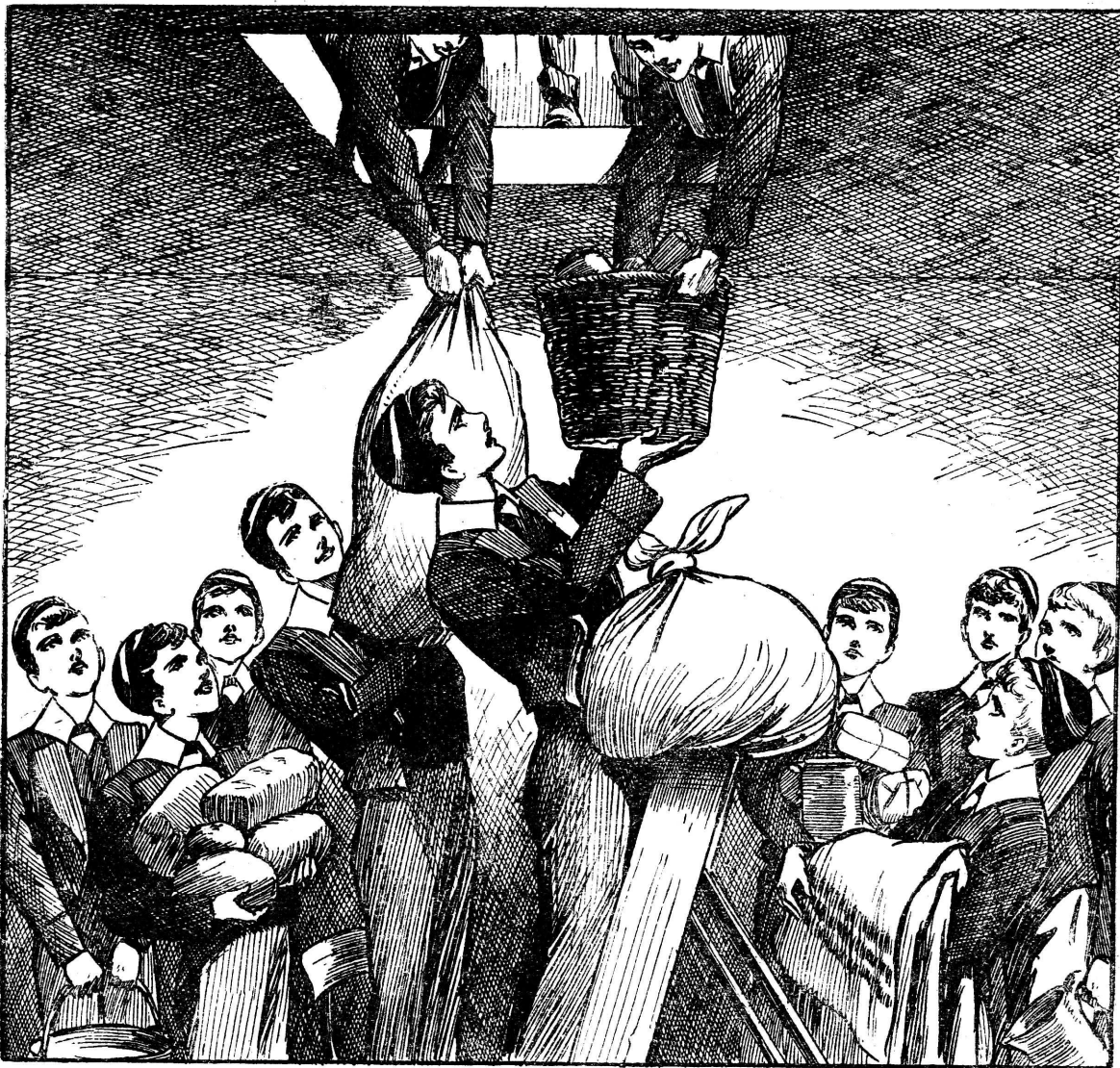
"Wayland."

"Bai Jove! What are we goin' to Wayland for, Tom Mewwy?"

"You'll see when we get there, Gussy."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Oh, Tommy has been reading newspaper serials, and he's



A party of raiders descended to the lower regions, and the larder was cleared of most of its contents, which were conveyed upstairs and passed up to the dormitory. The outlaws of the school were now provisioned for a siege.

(An incident from "THE OUTLAWS OF THE SCHOOL!" the splendid, complete school tale of Harry Wharton & Co., by Frank Richards, contained in this week's issue of "THE MAGNET" Library. Now on Sale. Price One Penny.)

getting mysterious," said Monty Lowther. "Give him his head—he'll get out of it."

"But if we're going on a railway journey, we ought to have brought some grub," said Fatty Wynn anxiously. "I've only laid in enough for a picnic."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Of course, we can get a fresh supply at the station," the fat Fourth-Former remarked. "You can get luncheon baskets and sandwiches at Wayland."

"Yaas, wathah, and pewwaps we could have a special twain to cawwy the gwub in," Arthur Augustus D'Arcy suggested sarcastically.

"Well, it's no good going hungry. I've always noticed that if you want to enjoy yourself for a day, the best thing to do is to lay a solid foundation."

And Fatty Wynn, by way of laying a solid foundation for the day, began to nibble at sandwiches.

The juniors tramped through the wood, taking a devious path. Tom Merry kept his eyes well open, and the other fellows soon became aware of the fact that he was looking for something or somebody. But in answer to questions the hero of the Shell simply shook his head. He had nothing to tell.

It was not till the juniors were near the Wayland road, on the other side of the woods that Tom Merry saw anything

to arouse his suspicions. Then a rustle in the thicket caught his ears, and he ran from the path, just in time to see a figure disappear into the wood. He caught but a momentary glimpse of it, but it looked to him very like that of one of the foreigners who had attacked Sir Richard Standish the day before. But the man, whoever he was, vanished in a moment.

"Bai Jove! What's the mattah?" asked Arthur Augustus, as Tom Merry came back to the footpath, red and panting.

"It's all right."

"Look here," said Blake. "I know jolly well you've been looking out for something ever since we left St. Jim's. Why can't you tell us what's up?"

"I'll tell you in the train."

"Blessed if I can see what there is to be so jolly mysterious about," said Figgins.

"Let's buck up," said Tom Merry abruptly.

His face was so grave and concerned that the other fellows said no more, but they hurried on to Wayland. They reached the railway-station, with a quarter of an hour to wait for the train Tom Merry intended to take. Tom Merry looked round the station vestibule, but there was no sign of the Spaniards. He breathed freely again. The thought had been in his mind that somehow Rodriguez had discovered the plan for getting the packet to Southampton. But it

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was more probable that the Spaniards, for whom the police were now searching, had hidden themselves in the wood, and that the meeting by the footpath had been by chance, if indeed it was one of the foreigners whom he had caught a glimpse of there, and he was not sure of that.

"Go on the platform, you fellows," said Tom Merry—"the down platform."

"That's where the express stops," said Figgins.

"Right you are!"

"But there's no train till after the express has gone."

"It's all right. Wait for me there while I get the tickets."

"Oh, all serene."

The juniors, very much puzzled, went on the platform. Tom Merry's manner was enough to show them that there was something very unusual toward. Tom Merry hurried to the booking-office, and took nine tickets for Southampton. There was no one of a foreign aspect in the station near him, only a man was waiting his turn at the booking-office—a sunburnt man, with a pair of very keen, black eyes that seemed to Tom Merry to be watching him. But he put that down to his nervous fancy. The man was evidently an Englishman, and there was no reason whatever to suppose that he had any connection with the Spaniards.

Tom Merry put the tickets in his pocket, and hurried to the platform, where the juniors were awaiting him. They looked at him inquiringly.

"Got the tickets?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Yes."

"Where are they for?"

"You'll see when the train comes in."

"My hat! This is getting rather thick! You'll make us think that you're off your silly rocker soon, Tom Merry!" exclaimed Digby.

"Let me alone. I'll explain when we're on the train. Can't you see that I'm only carrying out instructions?" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Whose instructions?"

"I'll tell you on the train."

"My word! All right! If you're not off your rocker, I suppose you'll explain, all in good time," said Digby resignedly. "But my private belief is that you've got a screw loose."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors kept their eyes curiously upon Tom Merry. Even Fatty Wynn forgot the probable necessity of another lunch-basket or two. They observed that Tom Merry kept his eyes upon the entrance to the platform, as if fearing that someone would come. The sunburnt man whom he had seen in the vestibule came sauntering in. He wore a brown slouched hat, and had a thick, black cigar between his teeth. He came up to the group of juniors.

"The Southampton express stops here, I think?" he asked.

"Yaas, sir," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Can you tell me whether it stops at Brookfield?"

"Yaas, wathah."

"Thank you!" said the man civilly. "Then that's my train."

And he sauntered away.

Tom Merry drew a deep breath of relief. If the man was going by the express, he was evidently getting off at Brookfield, twenty miles down the line, and so could not be one of the gang tracking him to Southampton. There was a shrill whistle on the line, and the express came tearing in.

"Come on," said Tom Merry, as the train stopped.

The juniors stared.

"But that's the express, deah boy," said D'Arcy.

"I know it is."

"It's going to Southampton."

"So are we."

"What!" exclaimed all the juniors together.

"Buck up!" said Tom Merry.

And the juniors, in utter amazement, followed Tom Merry into the train.

CHAPTER 9.

Tracked!

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as he settled in a corner seat, and brushed a speck of dust from his trousers. "Bai Jove! This is wathah a surprise."

"Yes, rather," said Digby, with emphasis. "And it only convinces me of what I suspected before—that Tom Merry is off his rocker."

"Looks like it to me," said Monty Lowther, thoughtfully, with a glance at his chum. Tom Merry was sitting in a corner of the carriage, buried in thought. He did not seem to hear the remarks of his companions.

"Have you noticed anything strange in his manner lately?" asked Blake affably.

"Any queerness about him?" suggested Digby.

"Yes, I have," said Lowther seriously.

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"Bai Jove! What was it?"

"He decided to bring you fellows along on this expedition, when he might have left you at home," said Lowther blandly.

"Queer, wasn't it?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Figgins.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Blessed if I can see anything to cackle at in Lowther's rotten attempts at humour," said Blake crossly, as Figgins & Co. roared. "Look here. I know perfectly well that Tom Merry is balmy in the crumpeet, and we shall get an awful ragging from the Head for going to Southampton in this giddy express."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Wake up!" roared Kerr, giving Tom Merry a dig in the ribs that made him jump. "Are you going to sleep without explaining what the whole bizney is about?"

"Ow! You ass! I wasn't going to sleep!"

"Wake up, then; explain."

"Yaas, wathah! I quite agwee with my fwient Kerr. I considah that ewevy gentleman pwesent is entitled to an explanation, Tom Merry."

"I'll explain as far as I can," said Tom Merry, sinking his voice. "I've got to go to Southampton to deliver a message, and I've brought you fellows along to give you a run, and because it will be safer in a crowd. That's all I can say at present."

"Who's the message to?"

"I'm not allowed to say."

"Who's it from?"

"Same thing."

"What is it?"

"I don't know that myself."

"Bai Jove!"

"Well," said Figgins, rubbing his nose thoughtfully. "I should think the ass was hoaxing us, only it's pretty clear the Head has really given us a day off, and so there must be something in it."

"Yaas, wathah! I nevah thought of that."

"I suppose we must be content with crumbs of information at present," said Blake. "Blessed if I know what they trusted the message to a Shell fellow for. I would have taken it."

"Yaas, wathah! Pewwaps, upon the whole, Tom Mewwy, it would be bettah to confide the whole mattah to me, and wash your hands of it," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy thoughtfully. "What is wæquered in such a mattah is a fellow of tact and judgment, and—"

"Rats!"

"If you say wats to me, Tom Mewwy—"

"I didn't say wats—I said rats."

"You uttah ass!"

"Look here, are you afraid of being followed, Tommy?" demanded Manners. "You've looked like it ever since we left the school."

"Well, yes," said Tom Merry. "I may as well tell you that much, and you can help me to keep a look-out. If you see either of those Spanish chaps who tried to rob Sir Richard Standish yesterday, they're following me."

"Then you're going on Sir Richard's bizney?"

Tom Merry was silent.

"Excuse me. That's not a fair question," said Manners. "We won't ask you anything, Tommy. Only don't lock so worried. We haven't seen any giddy Spaniards."

"Hush!"

A form passed along the corridor. It was the man in the slouched hat who had inquired whether the express stopped at Brookfield. He glanced carelessly into the carriage, and nodded to the juniors, and passed on down the corridor. Tom Merry wrinkled his brows.

"Blow!" he muttered. "I wish it wasn't a corridor train. Look here, will you fellows keep your eyes open, and see if that chap gets out at Brookfield."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"You don't think he's watching you?" Monty Lowther exclaimed, in surprise.

"I don't know what to think," Tom Merry confessed. "I thought I saw one of the Spaniards in the wood, but I'm not sure. As a matter of fact, this thing is getting on my nerves a little, I believe, and I suspect every stranger I see. That fellow looked like a seafaring man, and there aren't many of that sort in Wayland."

"They come up sometimes, though. That man isn't a Spaniard."

"No! Still, see if he gets out at Brookfield."

"I shall have to get out at Brookfield," Fatty Wynn remarked meditatively.

"What on earth for?"

"To get some grub. There's no dining-car on this train. It's sickening, but this express is run without a dining-car. You didn't warn me that we were going to Southampton, or I'd have laid in enough grub. What I've got here won't last us half the distance."

"Oh, choose it, Fatty," said Tom Merry. "We want to attract as little attention as possible. None of us must leave the train."

"Oh! Now, look here, Tom Merry, do be reasonable! How can we possibly get to Southampton on a couple of lunch-baskets, when there are nine of us?" demanded Fatty Wynn warmly.

"Shut up!" roared Figgins. "If you jaw any more about grub, Fatty, I'll sling you out into the corridor, and your blessed lunch-baskets after you."

"Look here, Figgy—"

"Ring off!"

And the fat Fourth-Former subsided into indignant silence. The juniors watched from the train windows when the express stopped at the station. If the sunburnt seafaring man had alighted from the train, they would certainly have seen him. They did not see him. They saw several passengers board the train, but no one alighted.

"He hasn't got down!" said Figgins, as the express started again.

Tom Merry nodded. His suspicions were confirmed now. They had been vague at first, but surely he had grounds for them now—the seafaring man in the slouch hat was following him. He could not doubt it.

"Perhaps he's eating sandwiches, or tucking in at a lunch-basket, and hasn't noticed the train stop," Fatty Wynn suggested. "That sort of thing's happened to me."

"But he isn't a prize porker," said Kerr.

"Look here, Kerr—"

"Oh, shush!"

And Fatty Wynn "shushed." The juniors were silent and concerned, their eyes fixed upon Tom Merry. Tom Merry did not speak, but there was a deep and anxious frown upon his brow.

CHAPTER 10.

On the Express.

TOM MERRY turned the matter over in his mind. Sir Richard had told him to tell his companions nothing, excepting in the unlikely event of his being attacked by the rascals who were seeking to obtain possession of the packet. But that event now was far from unlikely, and if Tom Merry found himself watched, with an attack imminent, it was evident that under such circumstances, the baronet would approve of his taking the other fellows into the secret, so that they could guard against the danger together. Tom Merry determined to tell the juniors as much as he knew himself.

That was the outcome of his cogitations. He raised his head at last, after a long and deep reverie. The other fellows were watching him.

"I think I'd better let you all into it," he said abruptly.

"All of you come into this carriage."

The party from St. Jim's was too numerous to occupy only one carriage, and they had two compartments adjoining on the corridor. But they all crowded into Tom Merry's compartment to hear what he had to say, Figgins standing just outside the door in the corridor to keep watch against possible spies and eavesdroppers.

Tom Merry explained the whole matter so far as he understood it.

His story was listened to with the keenest interest and surprise. The juniors had not connected, in their minds, this sudden expedition to Southampton with the coming of the baronet to St. Jim's the previous day.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "It looks to me like bein' a dangewous bisney, deah boy. May I make a suggestion?"

"Go ahead, Gussy."

"Well, I think that you should hand the packet ovah to me, deah boy, so that I can take care of it."

"Ass!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"We'd better all keep our eyes peeled," said Blake. "If that fellow was really inside the school walls last night—"

"He certainly was," said Tom Merry.

"Well, then, he mayn't have cleared out when we were searching for him; he may have hidden himself somewhere, and may have heard something of this giddy scheme."

Tom Merry wrinkled his brows thoughtfully.

"I suppose that's possible," he said.

"Yes, rather. He might have climbed up to a roof, or even to a high window-sill among the ivy," said Blake. "A dozen men could hide themselves away in a place like St. Jim's."

"Yaas, that's vewy true."

"If he had an inkling of what was intended, the soundrel would let Sir Richard go back to London this morning without following him, and would follow us," Figgins remarked.

"Yaas, watah!"

"That's what I'm afraid of," said Tom Merry. "Isn't it

peculiar about that chap not getting off the train at Brookfield? He—"

"Hush!" muttered Figgins.

"What is it?"

"Here he is."

The seafaring man came down the train corridor. He paused at the crowded compartment containing the juniors of St. Jim's, and nodded to the boys.

"We've passed Brookfield, I hear," he said.

"Yes, ten minutes ago," said Figgins.

"Missed it," said the seafaring man. "I was asleep in the train. I suppose I'm booked for Southampton now."

"No; we stop at two or three stations," said Figgins.

"Thanky, my lad."

And the seafaring man passed on. The juniors looked at one another. The forced explanation as to why the man had not left the train did not satisfy them. He was far from looking like a man who would go to sleep and miss his station. Besides, why should he take the trouble to explain to them, if not to avert suspicion.

"The chap is on the track," said Kerr quietly.

"I'm pretty certain about it," said Tom Merry. "Sir Richard never mentioned any Britisher as being in the plot, but he spoke as if there were a good many of the rascals, and this may be one of them. I think that chap is English; he got his dark skin in the tropics."

"Yes, rather. Look here, several passengers got on at Brookfield," said Kerr sagely. "Those Spanish chaps may be among them. They could easily have cut across country in time, if they were in the wood when we came through from the school. You remember we had a long wait for the express at Wayland."

"Bai Jove!"

"If this man means mischief, he won't be alone on the train," said Kerr. "It's more than likely that the Spanish chaps got on, too. Suppose I take a stroll along the train, and see if they're there. I didn't see them yesterday, but I should know Spaniards if I saw them, of course."

"I'll come, too," said Lowther, "as I did see them yesterday."

"Good," said Tom Merry. "Both of you go."

And Kerr and Lowther went along the express train corridor. The train was going at a good speed now, rocking as it rushed. The juniors made their way along the corridor, looking into every carriage as they passed it, and scanning the faces of the occupants. They received a good many stares in return, but that did not disconcert them. They did not mean to leave a single face unconcerned.

In a carriage at a distance from their own, two men were seated in corner seats, with newspapers held up as if to read. They could not be seen, and the two juniors guessed that the newspapers had been raised on the approach of footsteps in the corridor.

They were not to be so easily baffled.

Monty Lowther coolly entered the carriage, and bumped into one of the newspapers, knocking it down from the hands that held it. There was an angry exclamation in a foreign tongue, and a swarthy face started into view. There was a glimmer of gold car-rings under black thick hair.

The Spaniard and Monty Lowther looked at one another. The recognition was mutual. The man with the car-rings knew the junior who had helped to deprive him of the stolen packet the previous afternoon. And Monty Lowther, of course, knew the foreigner at once. He was not a man easily forgotten.

The junior stepped back out of the carriage into the corridor. The other man lowered his paper, and was seen to be the other Spaniard. They glared at the juniors, but did not speak; they appeared to be too nonplussed to know what to do. There were other passengers in the compartment, and any violence was impossible. The juniors retreated down the corridor again, leaving the two Spaniards enraged and puzzled what to do.

They rejoined Tom Merry & Co.

"We've found them," said Kerr.

Tom Merry started. He had more than half expected it, yet the discovery that the rascally foreigners were really on the train came as a shock to him.

"The Spaniards!" he exclaimed.

"Yes."

"Both of them?"

"Yes," said Lowther, "as large as life."

"Did they see you?"

"We couldn't help it; I had to bump over the paper one of them was holding, so as to be able to get a squint at his chivvy."

Tom Merry nodded thoughtfully.

"Look here," he said. "Both those men are wanted for attacking Sir Richard Standish yesterday. We could swear to

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their identity, and have them arrested at the next station. How's that for a wheeze?"

"Bai Jove! That's wipplin'!"

"The train's stopping now," said Manners.

The express was slowing down. Tom Merry looked out of the window. The train was passing a green embankment, previous to running into the station. As the St. Jim's junior looked, a man leaped from the train, and rolled down the grassy slope. Another man immediately followed. It was a dangerous jump, but the soft grass and the slope broke the fall, and the two men picked themselves up nimbly and ran.

Tom Merry caught only a glimpse of them. But he knew that they were Juan Rodriguez and Yancz, the two Spaniards.

They were gone!

"My hat!" said Monty Lowther, with a deep breath. "They're nery beggars, at any rate. I shouldn't care to make that jump, if I could help it."

"Bai Jove! Wathah not! They must have uttally wained their twousahs, wollin' on the gwound in that way."

"They're gone!" said Figgins.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We've nothing more to fear from them if we remain on the train," said Kerr thoughtfully. "I suppose they guessed we should denounce them. But—suppose that seafaring man is one of the gang—"

"It's pretty certain now."

"He may have other associates here," said Kerr. "There may be half a dozen of them on the train for all we know."

Tom Merry set his lips.

"It's rotten," he said. "It's pretty clear now that they know the whole scheme. Those Spaniards could not have got on the train for nothing. That seafaring man is one of the gang, and he means business. One of the Spanish rascals must have been hanging about St. Jim's, after all, last night, and must have learned something; he certainly didn't hear me saying anything, as I kept mum, but he might have heard Sir Richard Standish giving me instructions, or talking about it with the Head. The question is, what are we going to do? There's no hurry about getting to Southampton. Can we dodge them? A most important thing is not to let them know the ship that the packet is taken to. They're a desperate gang, and the packet is extraordinarily valuable. Sir Richard says, and if they know what ship it is on, they will follow it and attack it at sea."

"Bai Jove! Piwacy, deah boys."

"Well, piracy is no worse than robbery on land, and they've done that," said Tom Merry. "They seem to have plenty of money, and this packet is worth as much to them as to Sir Richard. They must not know the ship we are taking it to. Now, that seafaring man is going to follow us, and see where we go, even if he cannot make any attempt to rob us now that his friends have bunked."

"No doubt about that."

"Well, look here, we can't have that. Sir Richard was very earnest about the importance of not letting the rascals know the steamer. Look here, we shall have to leave the train, and get to Southampton some other way," said Tom Merry abruptly.

And the juniors, after discussing the matter, agreed that it was the only possible method of throwing the shadower off the track. They waited for the express to stop at the next station.

CHAPTER 11.

Shadowed!

THE juniors were all ready by the time the express stopped.

They had no luggage, excepting Fatty Wynn's lunch-baskets—and one of them was empty by this time, and could be left behind in the carriage.

They intended to jump off the train at the last moment, so that the shadower, who would not be prepared for that move, would be carried on to Southampton in the express, without having time to follow them.

Tom Merry looked out of the carriage window as the train slowed down in the station, the last stop before the seaport.

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Along the train another head was projected from a window—a head crowned by a brown, slouched hat.

It was the head of the seafaring man.

He was watching, with his keen black eyes, to see if anyone alighted from the train. He would see them the moment they left, that was certain. But it could not be helped. If he leaped out after them at the last moment, at all events, they would know beyond the possible shadow of a doubt that he was following them.

The train stopped! The juniors moved along the corridor, and just before the express got into motion again, they leaped out one after the other. Tom Merry was last, and the train was already moving when he jumped out upon the platform. The juniors stood in a breathless group, watching the train. As it moved on, a lithe figure leaped from one of the doors, and fell, and the sunburnt, seafaring man picked himself up on the platform, put his slouched hat straight again, and nodded to the juniors.

"Nearly missed it again," he remarked.

The juniors did not reply. They walked to the station exit, and the seafaring man strolled carelessly after them, lighting a cigar. They went out into the street of the country town, and the shadower followed.

"He's hardly making a secret of it now," Figgins remarked, glancing back and seeing the slouch hat turn a corner behind them.

"Wathah not?"

"We'll stop him, though," said Tom Merry, with a glint in his eyes.

"How can we stop him?"

"We'll go into the fields, and lay for him," said the hero of the Shell. "He will follow us there, and we can collar him and tie him up."

"Bai Jove!"

"It's justifiable enough under the circumstances," said Tom Merry. "We can tie him in a way so that he can get loose in a couple of hours or so, too late to do us any mischief."

"Good egg!"

"We'll drop into a shop before we leave the town, and get some lunch."

Fatty Wynn's eyes glistened.

"Jolly good idea!" he exclaimed heartily. "Now you're talking."

"We'll take it to the fields with us, and picnic," said Tom Merry. "We can buy some rope at the same time. We'll picnic somewhere in a lonely spot, and when that rotter comes along, we'll nab him."

"Wipplin', deah boy!"

"Yes, rather!"

"It will be a bit of a surprise for him," chuckled Blake.

The juniors strolled down the lane, turned into another, and sauntered into the town again. If they wanted any proof that the seafaring man was shadowing them, they had it now, for he never lost sight of them. Their wandering was perfectly aimless, and he could have had no reason for following such a course excepting to keep them in sight. They stopped at a shop in the town to purchase a large and well-packed couple of lunch-baskets, and a coil of rope,

which Figgins hid under his jacket, coiling it round his waist in the shop. Then they strolled out of the town again.

While they were doing their shopping the seafaring man had waited on the other side of the road. When they resumed their way, he followed them again, with his airy saunter. Outside the town were fields and meadows, with a rim of dark woods in the distance; and it was towards these that Tom Merry made his way. It was better for the ambush to be laid in good cover, where the seafaring man could be seized without having a chance to escape or to obtain help.

The juniors crossed the meadows, and followed a foot-path into a wood. From the cover of the trees they looked back, and saw the man in the slouched hat crossing the field by the same path.

Tom Merry smiled grimly. "We'll get a bit further on, and stop him," he said.

"Yaas, wathah!"

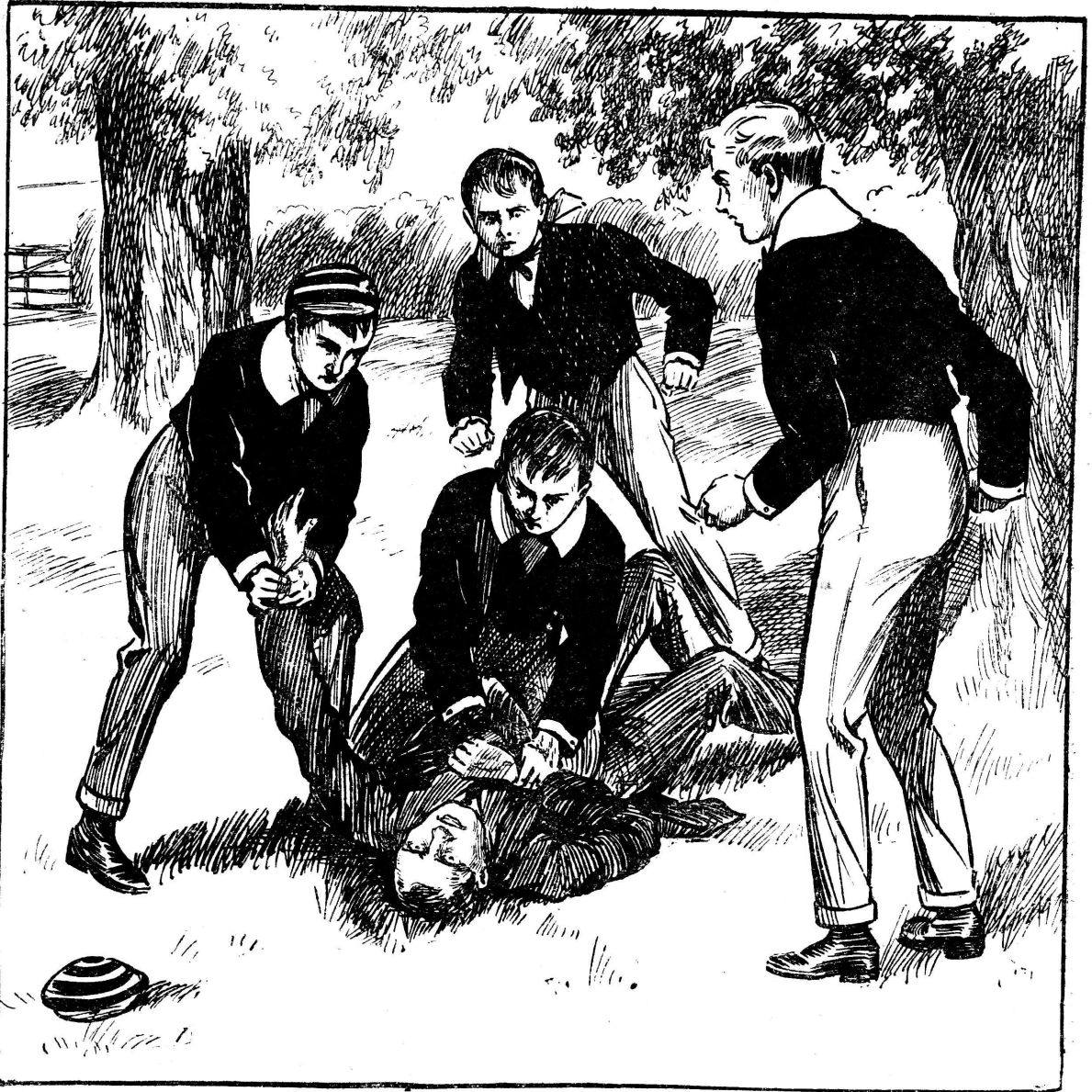
Next
Thursday:

"THE SCHOOLBOY EXPLORERS!"

A Splendid, New, Long Complete School and Adventure Tale of Tom Merry & Co. of St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

Order
Early!



"Go for him!" shouted Tom Merry. The juniors leaped upon the seafaring man, and he went down in the grasp of many hands. (See chapter 11.)

The juniors tramped on. Fatty Wynn nibbled sandwiches en route, but the other fellows were not thinking of lunch. They stopped at last where trees and bushes shadowed the footpath on either side, nearly meeting over it in an arch of twigs and foliage.

"Here's the place," said Tom Merry. "This will suit us down to the ground. Take cover, my sons!"

"Right-ho!"

"And not a sound, mind. When I call out, jump on him, and mind he doesn't have a chance to draw a weapon if he's got one!"

"What-ho!"

The juniors took cover in the bushes. From the thicket they could watch the path, unseen themselves. They waited in silence.

A sound of cautious footsteps came softly through the wood.

They waited tensely.

Over the bushes came a slouched hat, swinging into sight, and the seafaring man, looking round him quickly and keenly like a suspicious wild animal, came along the path.

He came abreast of the juniors without a suspicion that they were ambushed in the thickets, however. They were as

quiet as mice. He had just passed, when Tom Merry gave the signal.

"Go for him!"

Nine juniors leaped from the thicket together.

They crashed upon the seafaring man, and he went down in the grasp of many hands, with nimble juniors sprawling over him.

He uttered a stifled cry, and clawed out wildly. But he had no chance of even offering any resistance.

He was crushed to the earth under the weight of the juniors. Fatty Wynn sitting on his back, Manners and Lowther standing on his legs, and Tom Merry and Blake holding a wrist each, while the other fellows all had hold somewhere.

"We've got you," said Tom Merry.

"Oh!"

"You can lie still, you scoundrel! Get the rope off Figgy, Dig, and tie up his hands and feet."

"What-ho!" said Digby cheerfully.

The seafaring man struggled fiercely. He raised his face from the sward, and opened his mouth to shout for help. But as he did so, Kerr thrust some turf into it, and the man choked and gasped into silence.

The juniors chuckled softly as they bound the seafaring man hand and foot. He had shadowed them, and he had walked blindly into the trap they had laid for him, and he was a helpless prisoner now. Their way to Southampton lay unwatched if this man was prevented from following them.

When he was securely bound, they turned him over, and allowed him to sit up. His black eyes were scintillating with rage. He spat out the fragments of the turf Kerr had crammed into his mouth.

"Hang you! Hang you! What have you done this for?"

"Because you were following us."

"I—I was not!"

"Don't tell lies!" said Tom Merry scornfully. "You were watching us in the train, and you left it to follow us, and you have been shadowing us ever since."

"Why should I shadow you?"

"You know perfectly well, and so do we, and I sha'n't argue with you upon the subject. We're going to take good care that you don't shadow us to Southampton, that's all!"

"I did not intend—"

"Don't lie, I tell you!"

The seafaring man ground his teeth. It was indeed useless for him to lie. It was hardly possible for him to deceive the juniors after he had shown his hand so plainly. He lay in the grass, his eyes burning with rage, helpless in the hands of the fellows he had shadowed. Tom Merry & Co. had scored so far, at all events.

CHAPTER 12.

The Prisoner.

HERE was a short silence. The juniors, breathless, rested after their exertions, and the seafaring man sat glowering. Tom Merry glanced along the footpath.

"Someone may come along," he said, at last. "We'd better get him into the wood."

The prisoner uttered a loud, piercing cry, before Kerr, who was watching him, could clap a hand over his mouth. The next moment a handkerchief, folded tight, was stuffed in the man's jaws, and Blake was tying it there with a length of string, passing the string round and round the prisoner's head.

"That's the last yelp you will give," said Tom Merry savagely.

The prisoner glared at him in dumb rage.

Several of the juniors seized him by the shoulders, and he was dragged away from the footpath into the depths of the wood. Tom Merry & Co. kept their eyes well about them. Why had the prisoner uttered that cry? Did he hope for help from passing strangers, or had he associates near at hand? The latter was unlikely; but the juniors were uneasy, and well upon their guard.

They halted in a deep glade in the heart of the wood. The prisoner was dropped in the grass, and he lay there writhing in his bonds.

"You'll stay there," said Tom Merry sternly. "Before we leave you we shall loosen the cords a little, and you can spend a couple of hours wriggling yourself loose. It will keep you out of mischief while we go on our way."

The man could only reply with his eyes. But if looks could have killed, Tom Merry would have fallen dead upon the spot.

The hero of the Shell took a time-table from his pocket, and consulted it. He ran the list of trains over with a quick, keen eye.

"There's a train stops here at three, going to Southampton," he said. "We'd better catch that. It's a couple of hours to wait, but it can't be helped. We shall leave this rotter safely tied up, and get in at Southampton a little later than we expected, that's all."

"Good!" said Figgins. "The station yonder has only that one express stop at it, I believe. But if we leave this brute safely here, we're not in such a hurry to get to Southampton."

"No; any time will do."

"If we've got to wait, it's a good idea to have lunch here, and not go back into the town till it's near time for the train," Fatty Wynn suggested.

Tom Merry laughed.

"Right you are, Fatty!"

And the juniors opened the lunch-baskets. It was past the usual time for their dinner at St. Jim's, and they were hungry, especially Fatty Wynn.

They enjoyed the lunch under the greenwood tree.

The prisoner lay in his bonds, watching them with savage eyes; yet with an expression in his gleaming eyes that the juniors did not wholly understand. Perhaps he hoped something from the delay.

Tom Merry offered him food and drink, but he refused them both with a savage shake of the head.

"Silly ass!" said Fatty Wynn. "You'll be hungry

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before you get to anywhere where you can have anything to eat."

The good things disappeared pretty fast under the attacks of the juniors. They finished their lunch, and lay down in the grass, under the shade of the trees, to rest. They were still upon their guard, but for an hour or more there had been silence in the wood, and their suspicions had nearly died away. It was very improbable, after all, that the seafaring man had any associates in the vicinity, or that if he had they would be near at hand to know what had happened to him.

"This is what I call ripping," murmured Fatty Wynn, as he sank into the thick grass, and pillowed the back of his head against a projecting root. "I say, Tom Merry, I suppose it will do just as well if we catch a later train, instead of the three o'clock, won't it?"

"No, it won't, porpoise!"

"It's not good for the digestion to move immediately after a good meal," said Fatty Wynn dreamily. "I believe in laying a good foundation, but one ought to have a bit of a rest afterwards, you know."

"Rats!"

"Well, I think I'll have a nap," yawned Fatty Wynn. "You can wake me up when it's time to buzz off and catch that rotten train."

And Fatty Wynn closed his eyes and sank away peacefully into the embrace of Morpheus. Two or three more of the juniors went off to sleep, in the silence of the wood. But Tom Merry remained wide awake and watchful.

The expression upon the face of the prisoner caught his eye, and awakened his suspicions anew.

The man was listening; the strained look upon his face showed that clearly enough. He was listening—for what?

For the footsteps of rescuers? What was he hoping for? What was he expecting? The hero of the Shell did not know. But he knew that something was working in the prisoner's mind, and he was watchful.

Tom Merry turned over in his mind the thought of going back to town, and waiting in the station for the train. But if the seafaring man had any friends there, that was the way to set them on the track. And the two Spaniards, too, might have come on by the next train, and might be hanging about. It was best to remain in cover until the last possible moment, and especially to keep the seafaring man under watch as long as possible. Tom Merry decided to remain where he was.

But he was very watchful. The crackling of a twig in the wood made him start and look round him. But the minutes passed, and nothing happened. The anxiety in the face of the bound man was now intense. Tom Merry understood his anxiety. If help did not come for him his schemes were ruined for good. If he was left bound in the wood while the juniors went on to Southampton, he might as well throw up his cards at once. But did he hope for help to come? What hope had he? What did he expect?

Tom Merry gave a jump.

Echoing through the wood from a distance came a long, peculiar whistle, somewhat like the unmusical call of a parrot.

Was it a signal?

Tom Merry's eyes sought the bound man at once. He had given a violent start, and was working his jaws furiously, evidently in the attempt to get rid of the gag.

Tom Merry smiled grimly.

"So that's a signal of your friends, is it?" he said.

The man's eyes gleamed. He worked fiercely with his jaws, but the gag was tied in too well for him to move it, and Blake stood ready to jam his hand over the man's mouth if he succeeded in loosening the gag.

The man fixed his eyes upon Tom Merry's. Tom Merry, arrested by his look, came closer to him.

"You have something to say to me?" he asked.

The seafaring man nodded.

"Untie his right hand, Blake, and I'll give him a pencil."

"Right-ho!"

"You other chaps keep watch."

"Yaas, wathah!"

A pencil was placed in the man's freed hand. Tom Merry held the cover of his timetable for him to write upon. The man scrawled hastily, evidently listening all the time for a repetition of the signal in the wood.

"Give me the packet, and go unmolested."

Tom Merry laughed.

"It was not worth while writing that down," he said. "Of course, I shall do nothing of the sort. Have you anything else to say?"

The prisoner nodded.

"Write, then."

The pencil scratched over the cover of the book again.

"My friends are near. They are armed. They will not hesitate at bloodshed. The packet will cost you your lives."

The juniors read each word as it was written. Some of the faces turned pale. It would be no light matter to be attacked by armed desperadoes in the wood. They had no resource if deadly weapons were used against them. Tom Merry set his teeth.

"I shall not give you the packet," he said.

The pencil scratched on.

"Then you will be shot. You cannot escape from the wood—my friends are searching for me—you will fall into their hands."

"I shall risk that."

"Bai Jove!" muttered Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "This is gettin' wathah serious. Pewwaps you had better give the packet to me, Tom Mewwy, and I will bolt with it, and you fellows can covah the wetwear."

"My word," said Digby, "that's not a bad idea! If the villains mean to shoot, Tom Merry, we can't do anything. Suppose you slide off by yourself, and get back to the town, and we'll take the attention of the scoundrels. We'll make a row here, and draw them to the spot, while you slide off." Tom Merry's eyes brightened.

"A ripping idea!" he exclaimed. "If you fellows will run the risk—"

"Well, they're hardly likely to hurt us for nothing," said Blake. "They might shoot as a last resource to get the packet, that's all. If you are gone with the packet, we shall be safe enough."

"Yaas, wathah; but you had better let me—"

"Rats!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"You fellows all agreeable?" asked Tom Merry, looking round.

"Yes, rather!"

"Then I'll buzz off," said Tom Merry. "If you draw them here, I shall very likely get a clear run back to the town, and can take the train. You fellows come on to Southampton later, and meet me at the hotel where we stopped with Lord Conway last vac."

"Right you are!"

From the wood, but nearer at hand, came the long, shrill whistle once more, echoing among the trees. Tom Merry set his teeth.

"I'm off," he said. "We must think of the packet first. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Tommy!"

Tom Merry plunged into the trees. For a moment there was a rustle in the thickets, and then silence. Tom Merry was worming his way through the wood with all the caution he had gained in his experience as a boy scout.

The prisoner clenched his hand. He realised only too clearly how this might baffle him, even if his friends effected his rescue.

"We may as well let them hear us now," Figgins muttered. "It will keep them from looking out for Tom Merry."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Figgins opened a bottle of ginger-beer with a loud pop. Kerr dropped a plate upon a bottle, and it broke with a crash. The juniors waited and listened. The sounds had been heard in the silence of the wood; that was very clear, for in a few minutes there was a rustle in the bushes, and a swarthy man came running into the glade. It was the man with the ear-rings.

CHAPTER 13. In Deadly Peril.

THE Spaniard stopped in amazement at the sight of the bound man in the grass, and the juniors standing in a group. He gazed at the strange scene, and then ran forward again, towards the seafaring man.

The juniors of St. Jim's ran into his way.

"Hands off!" said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! Stand back, you dweadful wuffian!"

The Spaniard stared at the juniors for a moment, and then his hand went into his breast. It came out again with something in it that gleamed and shone. It was a polished steel barrel.

A thrill ran through the juniors as the man with the ear-rings raised the revolver. Would he shoot?

His dark and desperate face seemed to indicate that he would. In spite of themselves, the juniors retreated.

"Keep back!" said the man with the ear-rings, in a savage tone. "I am not to be played with—I would shoot you as soon as look at you. Carambo!"

"You hound!"

"Stand back!"

The Spaniard approached the bound man. The juniors exchanged glances; but they could not interfere. They had no weapon to oppose to a loaded revolver. The man with the ear-rings held the trump card!

Still holding the revolver in his right hand, the Spaniard

bent over the bound man, and opened a knife with his left hand and his teeth, and cut through the ropes. He cut the string and jerked the gag away.

The seafaring man licked his cramped lips, and mumbled. For some moments he could not speak articulately.

"Ha, mi amigo!" the Spaniard grinned. "You have allowed yourself to be taken by a set of boys! It is fortunate that we followed! Ha, ha, ha!"

The seafaring man mumbled and mumbled.

"Which of them has the packet, Senor Gally?" said the Spaniard, his black eyes roving over the group. "Do not move, ninos, or I shall shoot."

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Figgins.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"He is gone!" gasped the seafaring man, whom the Spaniard called Gally, finding his voice at last.

The Spaniard stared.

"Gone! What do you mean, senor?"

"He has gone."

"But—"

The seafaring man licked his lips.

"Don't you see?" he sneered. "These young villains have remained, to put you off the scent, and the other one—Merry they call him—has fled with the packet."

The Spaniard seemed utterly taken aback.

"Gone!" he muttered. "Fled! But he was here."

"He was here five minutes ago!"

"Five minutes! Cinco! Carambo, then I will have him yet. Yanez is in the wood, and may fall in with him. Which way, senor?"

"Come with me."

Gally sprang to his feet. He gave a cry of pain as he moved his limbs, cramped from the ropes that had held him fast so long. His face went white for a moment; but he did not heed the pain. Gritting his teeth hard, he tramped into the wood quickly in the direction Tom Merry had taken.

The Spaniard followed him.

The juniors started in the same direction; but the ear-ringed Spaniard swung round, and his revolver came up to a level.

"Not a step!" he said, between his teeth. "Not a step this way, ninos! Not a step, or I shall fire."

He plunged into the trees.

"Hang it!" said Figgins resolutely. "We're not going to leave Tom Merry alone, with three scoundrels looking for him! Come on!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We'll risk it," said Blake. "The scoundrel will hardly dare to commit murder, with all his blessed swank."

The juniors dashed into the wood after the two rascals. From the bushes ahead a swarthy face looked fiercely back, and a gleaming barrel swung to a level among the foliage.

"Look out!" shrieked Blake.

Crack!

The pistol-shot rang out like the crack of a whip. Blake dragged back Figgins, who was rushing on ahead. Figgins, gave a sharp cry.

"Good heavens! Are you hit?"

Crack!

The second bullet tore through the foliage over them, and brought down a little shower of leaves. The Spaniard disappeared in the wood, and the juniors halted. They gathered round Figgins, who was very pale.

He held up his arm. A hole had been torn on the inside of his sleeve—the first bullet had passed between his arm and his body. Had not Blake dragged him back when he did, the ball would have gone through his body instead of barely missing it.

"My hat!"

"Bai Jove!"

"That was a jolly narrow escape," muttered Figgins. "My hat! The scoundrel meant to shoot me down! They're in deadly earnest."

"What will become of Tom Merry?"

"I—I hope he won't resist if they find him," muttered Lowther, with white lips. "After all, he may get clear; and if he doesn't, he won't be ass enough to buck against a loaded revolver."

"Wathah not!"

"We'd better get on, and get back to the town," said Figgins soberly. "Only it's no good getting near that villain again. He means to shoot."

"If we had a firearm or two, it would make a difference," muttered Blake; "but fists are no good against a popper like that. Better keep our distance."

It was evidently the only thing to be done. They proceeded at a more moderate pace, keeping in the same direction. The Spaniard had long disappeared, and all sound of him was lost in the silence of the wood. The juniors listened with straining ears, in momentary fear of hearing a pistol-shot, which might mean that Tom Merry had fallen a

victim to the savage Spaniard. But the silence of the wood was unbroken.

They were near the border of the wood when a loud, shrill whistle came to their ears from the depths of the trees.

They halted.

"That's one of the villains signalling to another," said Blake; "I wonder if it means—"

He paused.

"That they've found Tom Merry?" said Figgins.

"Yes."

"Bai Jove! Listen!"

The signal whistle was repeated, from a greater distance, only the faint echo of it reaching the juniors' ears. Then silence!

They listened tensely.

But there was no further whistle—no sound in the wood—no crack of a pistol such as they dreaded to hear.

"What does it mean?" muttered Figgins desperately.

"Have they found Tom Merry?"

"Goodness knows!"

"Which direction did the whistle come from?"

"One could hardly tell."

The juniors looked at one another hopelessly. To plunge into the trackless thickets in a search for Tom Merry seemed useless. Perhaps the hero of the Shell had got clear, and was already waiting for them at the railway-station. If he was still in the wood, they had no chance of finding him.

"We'd better get on to the station," said Figgins, with a sigh.

"Yaas, wathah! I'm afwaid it's the only thing to be done, deah boy!"

And the others assented.

They tramped on out of the wood and across the meadows. There was no sign of Tom Merry in the fields, but he might be already in the town. They hurried on to the railway-station, and there they searched for the hero of the Shell.

But Tom Merry was not to be seen.

They searched for him; they inquired of porters and loungers. But there was no news of Tom Merry. It was clear that he had not returned to the station.

They gave up the search with sinking hearts, and waited. Where was Tom Merry? What had happened to him in the wood? Would they ever see the hero of the Shell alive and well again?

What could they do? To return to the wood was useless. There was no clue to his whereabouts, and he might be already in the town. He might arrive at the railway-station at any moment. To go to the police—the stolid, country police, would not be of much use, even if they believed the story. To wait where they were for Tom Merry—that was terrible, but it was the arrangement they had made, and it was best to keep to it. They waited, and before their minds floated the picture of a terrible possibility—the vision of a boy lying face downwards in the grass under the trees, motionless, with a bullet in his body. They tried to drive the fearful thought from their minds, but it would return.

CHAPTER 14.

Robbed!

TOM MERRY ran quickly through the wood after leaving his comrades in the glade. He kept his head low, and ran softly and silently, keeping his eyes well about him. A rustle in the thickets made him halt suddenly, and he started back as a swarthy man leaped out. It was the man named Yanez, the comrade of the man with the ear-rings.

The swarthy scoundrel rushed straight at him; and Tom Merry, with a desperate leap, bounded into the bushes and ran. He heard tramping footsteps behind him for a minute or two, and laboured breathing, and then the sounds died away as the Spaniard missed him in the wood.

Tom Merry ran on some distance, and then stopped to take breath and consider. To go on in the direction of the town was to court capture, for Yanez would certainly watch in that direction now that he had missed him. The junior decided to make a wide detour through the wood, and leave it at some other point. After all, he could reach Southampton cross country by devious ways, and could explain to his chums afterwards. Anything would do so long as it enabled him to keep the packet safe from the Spaniards.

He halted again as he heard the distant sound of pistol-shots. A sick feeling came over him, and his strength seemed to leave him for the moment. Had any of his comrades fallen at the murderous hands of the Spaniards? Had he brought them away from the school for that?

He tramped on more slowly. The two shots had not been followed by more, and they had told him the direction to avoid, at all events.

He had quite lost his way in the wood by this time.

The country was strange to him. He had never been in the

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wood before, and whether he was keeping a straight course or wandering in a circle he could not tell.

He fell into a footpath at last, and followed it, hoping that it would lead him to somewhere where he could discover his whereabouts. The afternoon sun was glinting through the trees, and Tom Merry was very warm and growing tired. He fell into a slower walk.

Suddenly from the trees a form came bounding, and before the junior could defend himself he was seized and flung to the earth.

A savage, swarthy face bent over him.

Tom Merry struggled desperately. But a knee was on his chest, and his arms were held in a grasp of iron.

Yanez, the Spaniard, grinned down at him.

"So I have found you again, seniorito!"

"You foreign hound, let me go!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry struggled hard. But he was pinned to the earth, and powerless to release himself. His resistance did not trouble the Spaniard. Yanez uttered a whistle that rang through the wood—the signal whistle that the juniors had heard at a distance. It was answered from the wood, and there was a sound of running feet a few minutes later, and the seafaring man and Juan Rodriguez came panting up.

They uttered a simultaneous exclamation of satisfaction at the sight of Tom Merry in the grasp of the Spaniard.

"It is he!" exclaimed Rodriguez.

"Tom Merry!" as they call him, grinned Gally. "He does not look so merry now. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The rascals laughed cheerfully. They knew that the packet was upon Tom Merry, and they were exultant. Yanez held the junior pinned to the earth, white and desperate.

"Have you taken the packet, Yanez?" asked Gally.

"No. I can feel it in his pocket."

"I will take it," said the ear-ringed Spaniard.

He thrust his hand into Tom Merry's breast, and drew out the packet of Sir Richard Standish.

His black eyes snapped with satisfaction at the sight of it.

"Por Dios, it is the same—the very same!"

"Good!" said Gally eagerly.

Tom Merry uttered a cry, and made a desperate effort to throw the Spanish ruffian off. But he made it in vain.

"You thieves! You scoundrels!"

Gally laughed.

"Keep him tight, Yanez, while we examine the packet."

"Lend me aid to tie him up, and I will help you examine the packet," said Yanez.

The ear-ringed Spaniard drew a cord from his pocket, and whipped it round Tom Merry's wrists and ankles in a twinkling, and knotted it fast. Then the junior was lifted from the footpath, and tossed into a thicket. Gally looked at him with a grin as he rolled breathlessly in the underwood.

"Your turn now," he remarked.

"You villain!"

"You can lie there and yell till someone hears you!" grinned the seafaring man. "It is not likely to happen soon. But do not yell while we are within hearing, or I shall come to you and silence you in a way you will not like."

The three ruffians opened the packet in a glade, close at hand, the bound junior lying within sound of the murmur of their voices, although he could not distinguish the words.

Their talk was in English; the seafaring man, probably, did not know the Spanish tongue.

Gally laid the packet on the greensward, and cut the string and unsealed it. It was sealed with red sealing-wax. He removed the outer cover of thick brown paper, and took up a note that lay inside. The note was open, and ran as follows:

"To Captain Crane, of the steamer Opossum.

"This is the packet of which you were advised by my wire. You will get steam up immediately, and proceed to sea, and after sailing in a westerly direction into the Atlantic for two days, you will take off the second wrapping of this packet, and you will find further instructions within.

"RICHARD STANDISH."

Gally whistled softly.

"You understand that?" he asked, after reading the paper out slowly to the two Spaniards, adding a few words of Spanish to help them comprehend.

"Si, si!" said Rodriguez. "Now for the second message."

Another wrapping of paper was removed.

A second note was disclosed. It ran:

"To Captain Crane.

"On reading this, you will make for Cape Three Points, on the West African coast, and you will deliver this packet, without opening it further, into the hands of my agent, Henry Hudson, who will come aboard and ask for it.

"RICHARD STANDISH."

The ear-ringed Spaniard's fingers twitched. "That is the packet that contains the maps and plans," he muttered.

"Undoubtedly."

"Carambo! We have succeeded."

"We have obtained the papers," said the seafaring man slowly, "but we have not yet obtained the concession of the rubber territory. We have only made a beginning. And listen to me, my friend. As soon as this boy returns to Sir Richard Standish, and reports that he has been robbed of the packet, the baronet will cable to his agent to take every step against us—to have us watched for, to have us spied upon, to leave no stone unturned to baffle us. He would not before trust the secret to the telegraph wire; but when the secret is ours, as it is now, he will cable it freely in the last hope of baffling us."

The Spaniard made a gesture with his hand upon his throat.

"The boy need not return!" he muttered.

Gally shrugged his shoulders.

"Naturally your first thought, Juan. But there are the others—eight others, scattered in the wood, and if one of them returns to make the report to Sir Richard, all is spoiled, the same as if Merry returned."

"Carambo! What do you propose, then?"

Gally smiled, a cunning, cold smile.

"You know my old skill with the pen," he said, sinking his voice. "What do you say to making up a dummy packet for this boy to deliver to the captain of the Opossum? We can return it to him as if we were mistaken, and he will take it to the steamer at Southampton, and deliver it to the skipper. The captain will sail under sealed orders, but they will be a little different.

The ear-ringed Spaniard grinned.

"Por Dios!" he said. "You are a cunning dog, Senor Gally!"

The seafaring man laughed.

"I have done more difficult things," he said; "but you shall judge. I have materials here. I am never without them."

He drew a writing-case from his coat, and opened it. He sat upon a fallen tree, and made a desk of the case, copying the letter of Sir Richard Standish with unwearied patience, half a dozen times. He had great skill with the pen, and this was evidently not his first forgery; the sixth attempt was an almost exact facsimile of Sir Richard's letter.

He held it up for the two Spaniards to read.

"What do you think of that?" he asked.

"It is wonderful," said Rodriguez. "I should never have known which letter was yours, and which was Sir Richard's."

"Good enough."

Gally crumpled up the letters. He took a fresh sheet, and wrote afresh, not a copy of Sir Richard's letter this time, but a fresh letter in an exact imitation of Sir Richard Standish's handwriting.

"To Captain Crane, of the steamer Opossum:

"On receiving this, you will immediately get steam up, and proceed to sea. You will take the boys who bring this message with you, it being my wish, and the wish of their headmaster, that they should make the voyage, and see a little of Africa before they return. You will make for Cape Three Points, on the West African coast, and hand this packet, unopened, to my agent, Mr. Henry Hudson, and also place the boys in his care.

"RICHARD STANDISH."

Gally read the letter in a low voice to the two Spaniards.

Rodriguez gasped.

"Dios! Do you think he will obey?"

"Why not? The order is nothing to awaken suspicion. He is certainly completely under the orders of Sir Richard, or he could not be trusted to sail under sealed instructions."

"True."

"My opinion is that he will sail without question, and take the boys with him. I will make up a dummy packet, with this note under the outside wrapper. That the packet is a false one cannot be discovered until the steamer is at Cape Three Points, when it will be opened by Mr. Henry Hudson, and he will find only waste paper in it."

"He will also have the boys on his hands, and can do with them as he pleases," grinned Gally. "It does not matter to us. It will take him a long time to get into communication with Sir Richard, and get the matter explained. Meanwhile, we shall be on the coast, not at Cape Three Points, but at the exact spot where the rubber fields exist, which we shall learn from these papers. We shall get the concession before Sir Richard and his agent have worked out what is the matter."

"Carambo! It is splendid!"

The seafaring man was very busy for the next few minutes. He chuckled softly as he made up the dummy packet which was to be delivered to the captain of the Opossum at Southampton.

CHAPTER 15.

The False Packet.

TOM MERRY lay alone in the thicket. He had struggled with his bonds for some time, but it was useless, and he gave up at last the attempt to free himself. He lay listening to the murmur of the voices of the three rascals, and wondering why they did not take the opportunity of escaping with their prize. The junior's heart was very heavy. He had lost the packet entrusted to him by Sir Richard Standish. It was not his fault. It was certain now that the ear-ringed Spaniard had overheard the baronet and the doctor discussing the scheme at St. Jim's. The rascals were in full possession of the plan. The fault was not Tom Merry's; but the loss of the packet weighed upon his mind.

There was a step in the thicket, and the seafaring man appeared. His breast-pocket was bulging, as if the packet was there. He bent over Tom Merry and untied him. The junior, surprised and relieved, sprang to his feet.

"Now go!" said the seafaring man. "And if you fall in our way again, beware!"

He strode away through the wood.

Tom Merry hesitated a moment.

That the seafaring man had the packet he was certain, and that he had parted from his comrades was equally clear. Would it be a chance to tackle him? But the man was doubtless armed, and he was too powerful for a boy to attack.

Tom Merry, wondering, followed the man, who was making in the direction of the town.

Gally strode on, apparently unconscious of the fact that he was shadowed.

Tom Merry's heart beat high and hard as they drew near the town. Was it possible that Gally was going to the railway-station?

If he wished to go on to Southampton he would have to do so, but—

Gally looked round as he quitted the wood, and Tom Merry dodged into the thickets.

The seafaring man strode across the fields and disappeared. Tom Merry ran. The man was making for the railway-station, there was no doubt about that; he could hardly have any other motive for entering the town, and he did not know that Tom Merry was shadowing him. That was how the Shell fellow worked it out.

Tom Merry took a side-street to avoid the seafaring man, and made for the railway-station at a run.

He hoped to find his chums there. But if he did not find them he could call upon the police to seize the seafaring man and force him to deliver up the packet belonging to Sir Richard Standish.

Tom Merry's hopes were high now.

He wondered why the rascals had not left him bound in the wood. But he might have starved there, and doubtless they did not wish to risk being charged with murder. And the seafaring man doubtless had no fear of a mere boy.

Tom Merry reached the railway-station, breathless.

There was a shout as he dashed in:

"There he is!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Tom Merry!"

"Hurray!"

The juniors of St. Jim's, overjoyed to see their leader safe and sound, surrounded him and clapped him on the back and shook his hands. Fatty Wynn affectionately tried to press a sandwich into his hand.

"Where have you been?"

"What has happened?"

"Is the packet safe?"

Tom Merry gasped.

"They've taken it!"

There was a general exclamation. The juniors stared at Tom Merry in dismay. They had expected it, but it was a blow.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated D'Arcy. "That's wotten, you know!"

"Beastly!" said Blake ruefully.

"There's a chance yet," said Tom Merry eagerly. "I'm on the track of the scoundrel. He's left the Spaniards, and I'm certain he has the packet, and I'm sure he's coming to this station!"

"Bai Jove!"

"We can lay for him, and have it off him in no time if he comes," said Tom Merry. "Of course, he won't dare to call for help—we could have him arrested."

"Wippin', deah boy!"

"Yes—if he comes!" said Kerr dubiously.

"Oh, he doesn't know I followed him from the wood! And he doesn't know you chaps are here."

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A Splendid, New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. and Bully Gore. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

"I should think he would guess both," said Kerr, still very doubtfully.

"I don't see why," said Digby. "Anyway, if he comes to the station that's proof that he doesn't guess, anyway."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"My hat!" exclaimed Figgins, who was looking out of the station doorway. "Talk of angels! Here he comes!"

"The seafaring man!"

"Yes, rather!"

"What did I tell you?" exclaimed Tom Merry triumphantly.

Kerr shook his head.

"Well, I can't understand it, that's all," he said.

"There are more things in the heavens and the earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy, my son," said Monty Lowther. "Tom Merry's right, and you're off-side, and here's the man himself to prove it."

Gally entered the station.

The seafaring man came straight on without looking about him, apparently not seeing the juniors, and made directly for the booking-office.

Tom Merry & Co. closed round him at once.

Even Kerr, suspicious and surprised as he was, could not help admitting that the seafaring man was undoubtedly there.

That he should be so utterly reckless surprised the Scottish junior and made him vaguely uneasy of some kind of trickery. But the rest of the juniors were satisfied. The man had not expected them to be there, and he had come to the railway-station as the quickest way of getting far from the scene of the robbery. That was all!

The man started as the juniors closed round him in a circle and faced them, his hand going to his breast.

"Don't be fool enough to draw a weapon here!" said Tom Merry. "We have only to call in the police!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The seafaring man ground his teeth.

"What do you want?" he muttered sullenly.

"The packet!"

"The—the packet?"

"Yes, the one you stole from me in the wood," said Tom Merry. "Hand it over at once, or we shall take it by force."

"I—I—"

"Hand it ovah, you uttah wottah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Bai Jove, I am gweatly inclined to give you a feahful thwashin', anyway!"

"Hand it over, you thief!"

"I—I haven't it!" faltered the seafaring man. "The Spaniard—Juan Rodriguez—he has it, and he is gone to—to London."

Tom Merry laughed scornfully.

"I think I can see it through your coat now," he said.

"Anyway, we know you have it; and if you do not hand it over we shall search you for it."

"And give you a feahful thwashin' into the bargain, you uttah wascal!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Oh, bump him!" exclaimed Jack Blake. "What's the good of wasting words on a bounder like that? Collar him and bump him!"

"Good egg!"

"Collar the cad!"

"Belay, there!" exclaimed the seafaring man hastily. "I—I'll give you the packet! Hang you! Take it, and my malediction along with it!"

He dragged the packet from his pocket and threw it upon the floor with an oath.

Tom Merry stooped and picked it up. To all appearances the packet was the same as when it had been taken from him. He turned it over in his hands. It did not seem to have been even opened.

Tom Merry's face lighted up.

"You have not opened this!" he exclaimed.

"Hang you!"

"Have you opened it?" demanded Tom Merry.

"I've not had time; I had to dodge the Spaniards—"

"Oh, then you have played the rascal to them as well as to us!"

"That's my business!"

"It's all the better if it has prevented you from opening the packet," said Tom Merry. "You can go; and you're lucky not to be arrested. Mind, if you follow us again—if you attempt to take the same train I shall point you out to the police at once. I have a definite charge to make against you now, and you know you can be locked up for it. If I see you again I shall apply to the nearest policeman."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Better see him off in the next up-train, to make sure," said Kerr, the ever cautious.

"Good idea!"

The seafaring man clenched his hands.

"You've got the packet," he said. "Let me go! I—"

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"You'll come on the platform with us and get into the first up-train," said Tom Merry. "You can take your choice of walking or being carried. If you make a row, we call in the police, and you'll get taken into custody. I don't want to waste time here in charging you at the police-station, but I will do it if you don't instantly do as you are told."

"I'm in your hands," said the seafaring man sullenly.

"It's just as well that you understand that," said Tom Merry.

Porters and loungers were gathered round, looking on. The juniors hurried the seafaring man upon the up platform; and ten minutes later a train came in. It did not stop till Wayland, and the man would be safely off the track before the juniors restarted upon their journey to Southampton.

Gally made no further demur about entering the train. He stepped into a carriage, a fixed scowl upon his face. The juniors waited for the train to go out before leaving him.

The train started, and the last the St. Jim's fellows saw of the seafaring man was his dark and scowling face looking sullenly at them from the window of the carriage. Then the train rolled swiftly away and they saw him no more.

But they would not have felt so satisfied if they could have seen him after the train had left the station and he was safe from observation.

The scowl upon his face faded away and was replaced by a grin of derision. The seafaring man chuckled softly.

CHAPTER 16.

The Arrival.

THE juniors made their way to the down platform.

The train they had intended to catch was gone, and they had to wait nearly an hour for another, and in the meantime Fatty Wynn proposed a feed. It was late in the afternoon now, and, as there was a buffet at the station, Fatty Wynn's suggestion was adopted, and the juniors made a meal while they were waiting for the train. Kerr was looking very thoughtful as he ate his cold chicken. The feed was a good one. Sir Richard had provided Tom Merry with plenty of funds, and the hero of the Shell was spending the money royally.

Kerr's expression drew Tom Merry's eyes upon him. Tom was in great spirits. The packet reposed in his breast-pocket once more; it had been, as he believed, unopened, and all was well. Of the deception that had been practised upon him he knew nothing, and he never even dreamed that the scene at the station and the surrender of the false packet was a comedy planned between the seafaring man and his associates. Kerr did not suspect so much as that, but he was suspicious and dissatisfied. He had a vague feeling that something was wrong somewhere, though he could not tell what or where.

"What's the trouble with you, Kerr?" asked Tom Merry cheerfully. "You ought to be looking a bit more chippy now, I should think. We've come out of it all right."

Kerr nodded.

"Yes, it looks like it," he assented.

"Looks like it!" repeated Blake. "What do you mean? We've got the packet back, haven't we?"

"I suppose so."

"And it hasn't been opened," said Figgins.

"So it seems."

"Seems!" exclaimed Tom Merry, a little exasperated. "Hang it all, Kerr, you can see for yourself that it hasn't been opened. My opinion is that the rascals quarrelled about it, and the man we took it from bolted with it and left the others in the lurch."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Queer that he should stop to set you loose, then," said Kerr.

"Well, yes. Perhaps he didn't bolt with it. Perhaps he made them bolt—threatened them, or something of the sort. He's a desperate character."

"Not so desperate as Rodriguez. He fired at Figgins in the wood, and might have killed him," said Kerr.

"Well, that is so, too. But look here! We've got the packet, and it's sealed up just as it was before. It's nonsense to suppose that if he had opened it he would have sealed it up again to carry in his pocket."

"Well, yes, I suppose so," Kerr admitted.

"Then isn't it certain it hasn't been opened?" demanded Digby.

"I suppose so."

"Blessed if your supposer isn't working double-time!" exclaimed Monty Lowther. "Hang it all, Kerr, can't you see things as well as us for yourself?"

"I suppose—"

"Oh, stop supposing, for goodness' sake!"

"Yaas, wathah! Pway stop supposin', deah boy."

"What is it you suspect about it, Kerr?" asked Tom Merry. Kerr shook his head.

"I don't know," he said candidly. "But there seems to me to be something fishy about the whole bizney, that's all. I can't get on to it, but it doesn't seem to me to be all serene, somehow. But that's all. Better let it drop."

"Oh, you're a blessed suspicious bounder!" said Manners. "You never are satisfied about anything, you know."

Kerr laughed.

"Very well. Let it go at that," he said.

Tom Merry looked a little worried.

"Well, Kerr is a keen chap," he said. "If he isn't satisfied, it makes me think there may be something wrong, but I'm blessed if I can see what it is."

"I can't, either," said Kerr; "so it's no good bothering about it. After all, I dare say it's all right. If it isn't, it can't be helped, that's all."

"What do you fellows think about it?" asked Tom Merry.

"Oh, it's all right," said all, excepting Kerr and Fatty Wynn. Fatty Wynn was too busy with the wing of a chicken to speak.

"Yaas, watah! It's all sewene!" D'Arcy added emphatically.

"What do you think, Fatty?"

"Eh?"

"Do you think it's all right?"

"Oh, splendid!"

"Splendid!" said Tom Merry, puzzled. "What on earth do you mean by splendid?"

"So it is, splendid—in fact, stunning!" said the fat Fourth-Former.

"Stunning?"

"Yes. I've never had anything like it before on a railway-station. It isn't as if it was a London restaurant, you know. But to get it at a railway buffet—"

"To get what, you ass? What are you talking about?"

"This cold chicken," said Fatty Wynn innocently. "You asked me if it was all right, didn't you?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What's the joke?" asked Fatty Wynn. "It's a ripping chicken—splendid! I shall make a note of the name of this station."

"You fat bounder! I was asking you if you thought it was all right about the packet!"

"Oh, the packet!" said Fatty Wynn. "Yes, that's all right, I suppose. You've got it, haven't you? I wonder if they've got another chicken like this?"

"Oh, go and eat coke!"

"Well, it's rather a serious matter," explained Wynn. "I can eat another, only if I get a tough one it will spoil all the pleasure I've had in eating a tender one. Do you think it would be advisable to risk it?"

"Br-r-r-r!"

"What do you think, Figgy?"

"Rats!"

"What do you think, Kerr?"

"I think you're a greedy porpoise!"

"Oh, draw it mild! No harm in a chap having a healthy appetite, I suppose? Upon the whole, what would you advise me to eat, Tom Merry?"

"Coke!"

"Oh, don't be an ass! Perhaps I had better have sausages now," said Fatty Wynn thoughtfully. "It's no good risking another chicken—it stands to reason that it wouldn't be so tender. Don't you think so, Gussy?"

"I weally haven't given the mattah any considewation at all, Wynn."

"Oh, rats! The sausages are all right, anyway. I know that, as I've had some—five, I think—no, six. I'll have some sassingers—"

"No, you won't!" said Tom Merry, rising. "The train's coming in. Hurry up!"

"Hold on a minute—"

"Rats!"

Tom Merry paid the bill, and led the way from the buffet. Fatty Wynn lingered behind, his eye upon the sausages. Figgins and Kerr seized him by the arms, and ran him out upon the platform. The train had stopped.

"I—I say!" exclaimed Fatty Wynn anxiously. "I could take some to eat in the train, you know. They are ripping! I only want a few—say a couple of dozen."

"In you get!"

"Look here, I'll get a dozen—"

"Buzz in!"

"I shall be hungry before we get to Southampton, and—"

"Pitch him in!"

Fatty Wynn was bundled into the train, and the rest of the juniors followed. The fat Fourth-Former's voice was loud in protest as he plumped upon a seat, and he did not cease till the train was rolling out of the station. Then he turned an indignant glare upon the other fellows.

"If I'm ill when we get to Southampton it will be your fault, Figgy," he said.

Figgins grinned.

"I'll take the blame," he replied cheerfully.

"I always get specially hungry at this time of the year," said Fatty Wynn pathetically. "Any of you fellows put any buns in your pocket?"

No fellow had.

"Got any milk chocolate or butterscotch?"

"Not a rap!" said Tom Merry, laughing.

"Groooh!"

And Fatty Wynn, as there was nothing to eat, went to sleep, and did not wake up till the train steamed into Southampton. Tom Merry & Co. were in high spirits as the train ran in. They had succeeded in getting the packet to its destination, in spite of the fact that the ear-ringed Spaniard had overheard the baronet's plans, and that the three rascals had lain in wait for the juniors on the way. They had something to pride themselves upon.

They alighted from the train in the red sunset. Figgins and Kerr shook Fatty Wynn with violent hands, and the fat Fourth-Former started up, rubbing his eyes.

"Gerrout!" he murmured. "Tain't rising-bell."

"Ha, ha, ha! No, it's not rising-bell, it's Southampton!" roared Figgins.

"Oh! I believe I've been asleep," yawned Fatty Wynn.

"Yes; I believe you have. Roll out!"

Fatty Wynn rolled out. Tom Merry & Co. inquired for the Opossum, and in a short time they were in a boat being rowed out to the steamer, which was lying in the harbour. Tom Merry's face was very bright.

"There she is!" he exclaimed, as he caught sight of the name painted in white letters upon a black hull. "The Opossum! There she is!"

"Hurrah!" shouted the juniors.

The boat ran up to the side of the steamer, and in a few minutes Tom Merry & Co. were treading the deck of the Opossum, and Tom Merry having explained his errand to a big-bearded mate, he was taken down into the captain's cabin to deliver his message.

CHAPTER 17.

Bound for Africa!

CAPTAIN CRANE, of the steamer Opossum, was a stout, bluff sailorman, with steady blue eyes and rugged features that told of honesty and determination. Tom Merry understood at once Sir Richard's reliance upon him. He was the very man to sail under sealed orders, and to obey his instructions, as far as they went, to the very letter.

He did not seem surprised by Tom Merry's message. He had had a telegram from the baronet warning him to expect a messenger, and it only remained for him to open the packet and ascertain whether any reply was to be sent by Tom Merry.

"Thank you, my lad," he said, as Tom Merry laid the mysterious packet upon the table. "Sit down, while I see if I have any answer to give you."

"Yes, sir."

Captain Crane removed the outer covering of the packet. Tom Merry watched him with intent eyes. The other juniors were waiting on deck. The hero of the Shell could not help feeling curious about the packet. The mystery of it, and the desperate attempts of the ear-ringed Spaniard and his associates to obtain possession of it, moved Tom Merry's boyish imagination very powerfully. Captain Crane read the letter to himself. A slightly surprised look came over his face, and he glanced at Tom Merry.

"Do you know what is in this letter?" he asked.

"No, sir," said the junior.

"Sir Richard told you nothing?"

"Only to deliver you the packet, and that you would remove the outer covering and find a letter there. I asked him no questions."

"You had better read the letter, then," said the skipper.

"It concerns you."

"Concerns me?" Tom Merry exclaimed, in surprise.

"Yes; you and your friends."

Tom Merry took the letter. He read it, blank amazement dawning in his face. Captain Crane had been prepared for anything, but Tom Merry was not prepared for what he read.

"To Captain Crane, of the steamer Opossum:

"On receiving this you will immediately get steam up, and proceed to sea. You will take the boys who bring this message with you, it being my wish, and the wish of their headmaster, that they should make the voyage, and see a little of Africa before they return. You will make for Cape Three Points, on the West African coast, and hand this

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packet, unopened, to my agent, Mr. Henry Hudson, and also place the boys in his care.—RICHARD STANDISH."

Tom Merry gave a long, low whistle.

"I suppose that is a surprise to you," said the skipper.

"My hat! I should say so, sir! Africa, a run into Africa!" Tom Merry's eyes danced. "And you are going to take us with you, sir?"

"Ay, ay! I shall obey Sir Richard's orders exactly, of course." He picked up the packet. The inner portion of it was tied and sealed, as the outward cover had been. The skipper of the Opossum unlocked an iron safe, and placed the packet in it, together with the baronet's letter. "We shall be under way in half an hour. Have you boys made any preparations for the voyage?"

"None, sir. We hadn't the faintest idea."

"I shall have to go ashore," said the skipper. "I will send on some things that you will want, so far as I can. There will be no time for you to go and get anything."

"We don't mind roughing it, sir," said Tom Merry eagerly. "Could we send a wife to the Head, sir, telling him we've arrived all right. But I suppose that would be giving the secret away, perhaps. Sir Richard said that not a word was to be said. He was very anxious not to let it possibly leak out that we were coming to this ship."

"Better say nothing, my lad. The Head will know you are safe. He will see in the paper that the Opossum has sailed, and he will not suppose that nine boys have been lost without leaving a trace behind."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Very well, sir."

He returned to the deck. The steamer was ready for sea. The captain went ashore at once to make his final arrangements. Tom Merry joined his chums on the deck, and they all looked at him in wonder.

"What's the news?" asked Monty Lowther. "When are we going back?"

laughing. "Isn't it glorious! A run into Africa. Oh, it's stunning!"

"But we shall want some clothes and things for tropical climates," said Blake.

"Captain Crane is going to send on board a lot of things for us. If the clothes don't fit, we can cut them down, or sew them up—anything you like," said Tom Merry cheerfully.

"Bai Jove! I nevah thought of that!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy rather excitedly. "I am down here uttaly without any baggage, deah boys."

"Go hon!"

"I have only one silk hat, and the gloves I stand up in."

"Only one pair of boots, and no twees at all," said D'Arcy distressfully.

"There are plenty of trees in Africa," said Monty Lowther consolingly. "Great forests, you know—trees and swamps, and—"

"You uttah ass! I mean twees to keep my boots on," said Arthur Augustus. "I have no hat, no hat-boxes, and no twunk—"

"You can easily get a trunk in Africa. If we shoot any elephants, you shall have the trunk of the first one killed."

"Pway don't be an uttah ass, Lowthah. Pewwaps we had bettah ask Captain Cwane to put off sailin' till to-morrow, deah boys, and I can do some shoppin' in Southampton."

"Ha, h., ha!"

"I see no cause whatever for disrespectful laughtah. It is uttaly imposs. for me to twavel without any baggage. You will see that for yourselves."

"Blessed if I can," said Tom Merry cheerfully. "You can rough it like the rest of us."

"I do not mind wuffin' it. I have wuffed it before. I have stayed in foweign hotels, where they gave you dirty

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"We're not going back."

"What!"

"We're sailing in the steamer, in half an hour, for Africa."

"Gammon!"

"Rot!"

"Bosh!"

"Draw it mild!"

"Come off, you ass!"

"Wats!"

Quite a chorus of incredulity greeted Tom Merry's statement. But the hero of the Shell only laughed.

"It's fact!" he said.

"But it can't be," said Figgins. "What are you getting at?"

"It's true, I tell you. Sir Richard's letter to Captain Crane contained instructions to take us with him to the West Coast of Africa. It was Sir Richard's wish, and the Head's. That's what the letter said. I read it. I suppose you want to go—eh?"

"Well, rather!"

"Bai Jove—yaas; but—but this is a gweat surprisew."

"Sir Richard must have arranged this with the Head, of course," said Tom Merry. "What a glorious run for us! We've been to America, but Africa—Darkest Africa! Why, it's simply gorgeous!"

"What about our people?" said Digby. "Their permission ought to have been asked, you know. I suppose the Head will arrange it with them; but—but really, you know, it's not the thing to let us go without asking them."

"Quite wight, Dig, deah boy. But pewwaps the Head has asked them already. As the whole mattah has been kept a scwet, he may have obtained their permish. without tellin' us anythin' about it, you see."

"Most likely," said Figgins.

"Well, it's ripping," said Fatty Wynn. "I shall enjoy it for one. Do you happen to know whether the steamer's well provisioned, Tom Merry?"

"Ha, ha! I dare say we shall find out," said Tom Merry

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serviettes, and have, on one occasion, twavelled for a whole day without a tooth-bwush," said D'Arcy. "I think I can wuff it with anybody. But I dwaw the line at twavellin' without an extwa toppah or any boot-twees. Pway be weasonable!"

"If you go ashore, old son, you go alone, and you'll lose the voyage," said Tom Merry. "The steamer won't wait for you."

"Wats! I shall put it stwaight to Captain Cwane when he comes on board."

Arthur Augustus did put it straight to Captain Crane when he came on board. The captain was rasping out orders, however, and unfortunately did not hear a word that Arthur Augustus was saying. By the time he listened to the swell of St. Jim's, the Opossum was well under way, and gliding out to sea. And then the skipper only laughed. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy rejoined the chums of St. Jim's, who were laughing, too. He was looking considerably distressful.

"The skippah wefuses to listen to weason," he said. "He declines to turn back, and doesn't appear to undahstand the importance of a chap havin' a decent outfit for twavelling. I weally do not know what is to be done."

"It seems to me that you're done!" grinned Monty Lowther. "Better make up your mind to grin and bear it."

"Wats! I suppose I shall have to bear it, but I wefuse to gwin."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors, in high spirits, watched the foam curling away behind the steamer, in the deepening sunset. All of them looked forward to the voyage in wonderful spirits, and they little dreamed of the sensation their sudden departure would cause at St. Jim's. As the Opossum glided on, and the shadows of night sank upon the sea, St. Jim's seemed very far away indeed, and all the thoughts of Tom Merry & Co. were turned toward Africa.

THE END.

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A Ray of Hope.

The cutting was from a South African paper, and read as follows:

"The brigantine City of Sidney, from Melbourne to Durban, reports having seen a vessel, evidently a yacht, towards the centre of that strange mass of floating weeds known as the Sargossa Sea. The City of Sidney was scudding under bare poles at the time, and could not stop to render assistance. The tug Zulu has gone to render assistance, should there be anyone yet living on board."

"Can it be my father's yacht the Morning Star?" he asked, as he handed the cutting back to Captain Flame.

"That is what we are going to find out," asserted the inventor.

He laid his hand, with a kindly touch, on Dick's shoulder. "Do not build too much upon the idea that, even if it is the Morning Star, your father is on board her," he added. "My opinion is he is not, and had not the tug been sent in search of her, I would have left the vessel to her fate."

Dick looked quickly up.

"Why?" he demanded.

For some seconds Captain Flame did not reply.

"Because there may be that on board which it would not be good for those to see for whom it is not intended," was Captain Flame's strange answer.

Ere Dick could question him further, he had turned on his heels and left the room.

Half an hour later the Octopus was travelling swiftly over the bottom of the ocean, headed for the Sargossa Sea.

"The Sargossa Sea."

Dick Dauntless gazed in amazement through the look-out to where, a mile ahead, a mass of brown trunks, growing so close together as to form a solid, impenetrable wall, rose in branchlike fronds to the surface of the sea.

"I thought the Sargossa Sea was a mass of floating weeds," he said at last.

A strange smile flitted across Captain Flame's pale features.

"So scientists have told us, but in this, as in many other things, they are wrong," he declared.

Then he stood for some moments gazing, with furrowed brow, at the thickly interlaced stems of mighty weeds towards which they were travelling.

Suddenly he turned upon Dick Dauntless and Jack Orde, saying, in deep, impressive accents, a-tremble with unwonted excitement:

"I tell you, boys, they are wrong. The Sargossa Sea is no mere waste of floating weeds, or how comes it that they defy the ocean currents, and remain chained to one spot for ever?"

"What the know-alls have called floating weeds are mighty ocean forests, beneath which lurk horrors and mysteries such as no living man has even so much as dreamt of. Thousands of ships have been driven by storm and tempest into those dreary wastes of vegetation, but of their crews how many have ever escaped? A dozen, or, perhaps, two dozen at most, nerve-shattered, ruined wrecks, who have only dared to hint at the horror from which they have escaped.

"Even I who have plunged into the deepest depth of the unfathomable ocean, whither none but myself has ever dared to penetrate, have shrunk from seeking to probe into the mysteries of the Sargossa. But where my passion for exploration could not drag me friendship leads, and I go to take from the yacht that which, living or dead, I know your father would not that any eye but mine should ever see."

He ceased speaking, but neither Dick nor Jack replied. They were watching, as though fascinated, the wall of brown trunks that would soon bar further progress.

A great dread filled their souls.

So sinister was the appearance of the tortuous trunks that it needed but little to make the beholders believe that they were living things writhing in agony.

What terror lay beyond that ominous wall of vegetation none could tell, yet all felt that a horror greater than any they had yet witnessed lay before them.

Suddenly Jack Orde grasped Dick by the arm.

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A Splendid, New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. and Bully Gore. By MARTIN GLIFFORD.

The Opening Chapters of "DEEP SEA GOLD," specially re-written for this number of "THE GEM" LIBRARY. Just read this, and you can commence the story to-day.

Dick Dauntless and Jack Orde, chums of Weltsea College, are bathing in the sea early one morning, when they are suddenly seized by enormous octopus-like tentacles and dragged swiftly down beneath the surface of the water. The chums are almost at their last gasp, when a dark trap-door appears before them, and they are pulled aboard a strange submarine craft, the like of which they have never seen before. It is, in fact, a submarine motor-car, and the boys are soon introduced to Captain Flame, the captain of the Octopus, as the strange craft is named.

The crew consists entirely of boys, with whom Dick Dauntless and Jack Orde are soon on good terms. So fascinating does life beneath the waves prove, that when, after a period of thrilling excitement and amazing adventure, Captain Flame offers the two chums their liberty, they decide to remain on board the Octopus and throw in their lot with him.

Their decision is confirmed when the chums learn that Captain Flame is bound for the Pacific with the express intention of searching for Dick Dauntless's millionaire father, who was a friend of his, and whose yacht has long been reported missing.

On the voyage to the Pacific a sharp look-out is kept on board the Octopus for the hidden treasure of the deep—the sunken gold which has accumulated on the bed of the ocean for centuries. Before long the trail of the French frigate Le Monde, which was lost with all hands generations before, is struck by means of her guns, which had evidently been thrown overboard to lighten her.

The ship is eventually found buried in the middle of a huge iceberg, and the treasure is taken aboard the submarine motor-car. Captain Flame then makes his way to his island home, and Jack Orde and Dick Dauntless are shown the wonders and mysteries of this marvellous city under the sea. The boys are being taken round by a guide, when Dick receives a message from Captain Flame, bidding him return to the Octopus at once. The cause of this hasty summons is revealed when the captain hands Dick a newspaper cutting. The lad reads it, and as he grasps the meaning of it his heart beats high with a new found hope.

NEXT WEEK: "THE SCHOOLBOY EXPLORERS!"

"Look yonder, a little to the right of that protruding branch!" he gasped, pointing through the glass, his every limb a-tremble.

Dick started.

A mirthless laugh escaped his lips.

"Getting nery—eh, Jack? It is only a skeleton such as we see lying about the bed of the ocean every day," he replied.

"Yes, yes; but look again! It is fastened to the limb!" almost shrieked Jack Orde.

An exclamation of horror arose to Dick Dauntless' lips.

It was true!

As though to warn them from their intended invasion of the mysterious Sargossa Sea, a human skeleton was secured by dull-shining, yellow chains to a dark brown limb of a mighty sea-tree.

The two chums gazed at each other in an amazement too deep for words.

The limb was fifty feet beneath the surface. No human hands could have placed the unfortunate victim there, yet only human beings, endowed with human ingenuity, could have forged those chains, or have used them for so terrible a purpose.

As Dick Dauntless gazed at the chained skeleton he fancied he saw something glitter a yard or so to the left of the grisly sentry.

At first he thought it was some silver-scaled fish darting through the weeds, but a second glance showed that the glittering objects were still there, shining from what appeared to be a twisted mass of stalks.

But even as he gazed the uneven lines seemed to take shape, and, with a feeling of unutterable loathing, he made out a grotesquely terrible face peering at them through the weeds.

So horrible was the apparition that the shuddering boy hesitated to draw Jack Orde's attention to it.

The creature was human—there could be no doubt of that—for a look of intelligence shone from the large saucerlike eyes which had first attracted Dick's attention; again, the face bore a certain well-defined human look, for its nostrils, though broad and flat, were not more so than those of the average negro, and the creature was furnished with a pair of ears, pear-shaped and pointed as those of a fox-terrier.

But the most unhuman features of this strange being was its bald head, the deadly grey colour of the skin, and a huge mouth, with colourless lips, that stretched literally from ear to ear.

Even as the boys gazed the creature thrust forward a pair of broad hands, the fingers of which were joined together by webs, through the weeds and drew them apart, revealing a short, broad neck set on a pair of hunched shoulders.

Resting on its hands, its elbows raised to a level with its head, the creature opened its mouth, and a deep, loud bellowing roar burst from its parted lips.

Simultaneously the boys burst into roars of laughter.

"It's a frog! We've been frightened half out of our wits by an enormous frog!" cried Dick Dauntless, with more than a suspicion of relief in his tones.

But their laughter ceased as suddenly as it had risen, for the bellow was changed to a shrill yell of fear, and, its large round eyes dull with terror, the strange creature turned to flee.

Too late!

Huge talons shot from amidst the weeds, the frog-man was engulfed in a huge claw, and drawn towards what looked like a huge, horned head.

Presently the crunching of bones came distinctly through the Octopus's electric receivers to the boys' ears, then all was still.

A bell sounding above their heads summoned them to the chart-room.

Thither they hastened, to find Captain Flame standing, with folded arms and furrowed brow, near the plate-glass window.

He, too, had witnessed that revolting scene.

"You saw it, boys?" he demanded.

Dick Dauntless nodded.

"It was awful!" he cried, in low, awed tones.

"Yet to find your father's yacht we must penetrate the region where such monsters dwell. Does not the prospect fill your heart with dismay?" asked Captain Flame, regarding the boy intently.

"No—a thousand times no!" almost shouted Dick. "What I have seen has only made me the more determined to proceed. Somewhere in that horror-haunted spot live beings endowed with a certain amount of intelligence, who not only slay, but take prisoners; for no people would take the trouble to put dead men in chains."

Captain Flame laid his hand approvingly on Dick's shoulder.

"Spoken as I would have had a son of mine speak had

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Heaven blessed me with one," he said; adding, as he turned to leave the room: "Come, we will see what the Sargossa Sea looks like from the surface ere we attempt to force our way into it from below."

The Launch.

Eagerly the two boys followed Captain Flame from the chart-room. They expected him to lead them to the room in which the torpedo-shaped boats were stored, but, instead, he made his way to the armoury, where they found Will Avery and Mopsa awaiting them.

"Take guns, pistols, and swords, then put on your diving-suits, and meet me on board the launch," ordered Captain Flame.

"The launch?" repeated Dick Dauntless.

It was the first intimation he had received that the Octopus carried any other boats save the small torpedo ones.

Captain Flame smiled at his evident amazement.

"I did not show all the wonders of my submarine car at once, Dick Dauntless," he replied. "Mopsa will take you to the launch when you are ready."

Needless to say, the boys did not lose much time in donning the diving-suits and in buckling on sword and cartridge-belts and ammunition-bandoliers.

Though excited at the prospect of adventure, they were very quiet, the thought of the terrors they were about to face, vague hints of the nature of which they had seen from the conning-tower, were not conducive to boisterous spirits, though not one of the party would willingly have stayed behind.

Presently, all being ready, they intimated the same to Mopsa, who, with the comical dignity he assumed when put in command of the boys, led the way up a circular flight of steps, which Dick had never mounted before, and, passing through a trapdoor, entered a tiny compartment, into which they found it difficult to squeeze.

Pressing a lever, Mopsa filled the small compartment with water, after which the ceiling of the round room flew back on hinges, and they climbed up iron rungs let into the wall on to the top of the Octopus.

Dick looked about in vain for the launch; nothing but the rounding roof of the submarine car met his eyes.

"Form single file!" ordered Mopsa.

Wonderingly the boys obeyed.

"Right turn! Quick march!" shouted the little Chinaman, swaggering about like a sergeant of the Guards. "Halt!" he added, as the foremost boy reached the end of the roof. "Front! Fall in!"

As they were already in line it might have seemed rather a difficult order to obey; yet the three lads performed the evolution in a way that quite astonished themselves, for the iron platform on which they stood parted to right and left, and they plunged head-over-heels into the water-filled cavity below.

At that moment Captain Flame appeared on deck, and gazed in surprise at the floundering boys.

"All aboard, sir!" reported Mopsa, clapping his heels smartly together and saluting.

Captain Flame made no reply in words, but he glanced angrily at the little Chinaman, and Mopsa's yellow face paled before the cold displeasure in the inventor's eyes.

Captain Flame made a sign towards the cavity, from which the boys had by this time clambered.

Eager to regain his master's good opinion, Mopsa sprang forward and touched a lever.

Immediately what Dick Dauntless took to be a larger torpedo-boat than those he had previously seen arose from the cavity in the Octopus's roof and moved swiftly towards the surface.

"Catch hold of the rings, boys!" cried Captain Flame, pointing to a number of iron rings that hung round the strange construction's side.

Wonderingly the boys obeyed; and the next minute were being drawn swiftly upwards from the depths of the sea.

A minute later the glittering cylinder was rocking idly on the waves.

Moving towards one end of the strange craft, Captain Flame turned a bolt.

An opening flashed from stem to stern of the glittering hull, some ten or twelve inches above the waves.

Swiftly it widened, and, the concave top sliding back into a groove, showed that what the boys had taken for a torpedo was in reality a well-appointed, comfortably-upholstered motor-launch.

At a word from the great inventor the adventurers clambered on board, and, removing their helmets, looked around them.

An impressive yet depressing sight greeted their eyes.

The launch lay on the outskirts of what at first sight appeared to be a boundless stretch of rich pasture land dotted



Even as the boys gazed, the fearful creature raised itself on a pair of broad hands, the fingers of which were joined together by webs, and, opening its mouth, burst into a deep bellowing roar. (See page 24.)

with clumps of dying bracken and intersected by the silvery streams.

A loud shout burst from Jack Orde's lips.

"Land! By all that's wonderful, land!" he cried.

Captain Flame smiled.

"Land which would engulf you as swiftly as the most treacherous quicksand if you left the boat, he declared. "No; before you lies the level expanse of the mysterious Sargossa Sea. The grass and that which looks like dying bracken is but seaweed—or, to be more correct, the tops of marine trees."

"Surely that is running water yonder?" objected Will Avery, pointing to where the sunlight glistened on the silvery streaks which divided the green expanse before them.

But Captain Flame made no reply; his eyes were fixed intently upon a dark speck rising above the vegetation some five or six miles away.

Following their captain's gaze, the boys looked in the same direction.

Even as they did so a thin, almost imperceptible, white cloud arose from the distant object, and faint but terribly distinct in the silence that obtained around, came the deep, resonant roar of a steam syren to their ears.

Again and again that useless appeal for assistance was wafted to their ears.

Each looked in dismay at the other.

There was something so terrible, so unnatural, in that booming sound rising from a deserted mass of submerged vegetation that the beginning of a horror, destined not to leave their hearts for many a long day, for the moment paralysed thought and action.

Captain Flame was the first to break the silence.

"It is the tug which was dispatched in search of the Morning Star," he declared, in tones of conviction. "But why is her syren sounding? What help can she hope to summon in these dreary wastes, where the eye can pierce further than sound can carry?" he added, partly to himself.

Dick Dauntless, who had been peering eagerly in the direction of the tug, laid his hand impressively on Captain Flame's arm.

"See! Just to right of the tug, is there not a second vessel?"

Following the direction of the lad's outstretched arm, Captain Flame looked long and earnestly into the distance.

"It may be you are right, lad," he declared a minute later. "At any rate, we'll go and see. Mopsa and Avery at the bows—the former: to watch the waters before us, the

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NEXT "THE SCHOOLBOY EXPLORERS!"

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other to look out for danger ahead. Orde, to starboard. Dauntless, to port," he ordered in his usual short, crisp accents.

As he sank down in the stern he pressed forward one of three levers which protruded from a highly-polished mahogany pedestal immediately before him, then, as the engine set the screw in motion and the launch commenced to glide through the water, he seized the tiller and skirted the meadow-like expanse of waves until he reached where a broad, open channel showed where the tug had forced her way through the Sargossa Sea on her errand of rescue.

Already the weeds were closing up the channel; but the launch's screw was protected by steel bars, which prevented them clinging round her propeller, and they glided on what might well have been the bosom of a weed-filled river towards where the tug lay, as they suspected, hopelessly entangled in the meshes of the fearful waste.

The steam syren had ceased to sound, and all was still.

The Mystery of the Tug.

Beautiful and green though the weeds around them looked, the depression which had settled upon the boys when they had first beheld it increased with every furlong the launch covered. Not a bird, not a sign of life, met their eyes, turn where they might.

And yet beneath the greenery through which they ploughed their way was a continuous rustling, uneven movement, as though unseen horrors surged around them on every hand.

As they pressed deeper into the centre of the Sargossa Sea the movement became more pronounced. Now and again they caught glimpses of all manner of repulsive things—water-snakes, sea-centipedes, crabs, crawfish, and occasional fleeting glances of strange, unknown creatures, which vanished ere the horrified spectators could trace their forms.

The tiller between his knees, Captain Flame rose to his feet and surveyed the tug through a pair of powerful glasses. When he lowered them, Dick Dauntless noted that even his stern, impassive face wore a look of wondering horror.

"What is it, sir?" he asked breathlessly.

For answer Captain Flame handed his glasses to the boy; then, dropping back into his seat, moved the launch's lever forward another notch.

As with accelerated speed the little boat sped through the weed-infested waters, Dick Dauntless focussed his glasses upon the tug.

As he did so, he drew in a deep, shuddering breath.

The distant vessel was a-bustle with life; strange forms flitted, with lightning swiftness, about her decks.

At that moment the bows of the boat rising on a wave, raised Dick's line of vision from the deck to the top of the tug's single mast.

A loud cry escaped his lips.

A figure was perched on the top of the mast.

They were still some distance from the tug, but yet close enough for Dick to feel assured that the object perched on that dizzy height was a human being.

Then his glasses almost dropped from his hand as he saw a fearful, long, scaly neck, terminating in an awful fang-armed head gliding up the mast towards the doomed man.

He saw the sailor throw up his arms with a gesture of despair, he saw the fearful mouth gape like a yawning chasm, then a mist floated before his eyes, and when it cleared away, the man was gone.

Trembling in every limb, he sank back into the boat.

"What is it, Dick? What did you see?" asked Jack Orde, in low, hushed tones.

Dick Dauntless shuddered.

"It was awful, horrible! Stop the boat, sir, for Heaven's sake approach no nearer!" he cried, turning appealingly towards the inventor.

Captain Flame smiled, almost contemptuously, at the trembling boy.

"What, turn back, when we believe your father's yacht lies before us?" he demanded, in cold, stern tones.

A shamed flush drove the momentary pallor from Dick's face.

"No, no, forward, forward!" he cried, in low but determined tones.

Captain Flame nodded, a pleased smile relieving the tension of his stern lips.

"Forward it shall be, my lad. We have faced the perils of the under sea, those on the surface shall not deter us, eh?"

His fearless words infused fresh courage into the boy's heart, but ere any could speak again, a loud cry of:

"Rock ahead! Full speed astern!" burst from Mopsa's lips.

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"THE SCHOOLBOY OUTLAWS!"

In a moment Captain Flame drew back the lever, then, as the screw ceased to revolve, thrust forward the reversing handle.

Once more the swiftly-revolving screw beat the water.

Too late!

The next moment all on board were hurled to the bottom as the launch's steel hull collided with a black obstacle, a foot or so beneath the waves.

In a moment they had regained their feet, but even as they did so, the boat trembled from stem to stern then commenced rushing forward at a fearful rate, although her propeller was working full speed astern, and her hull was three parts out of the water.

Clinging to the sides to prevent themselves being huddled off their feet again by the strange motion of their craft, the boys looked at each other in consternation.

A wild shriek burst from Will Avery's lips.

"The rock is moving!" he declared, in tones shrill with alarm.

Even as the words passed his lips, he staggered back with white, blanched face.

From immediately ahead of what the Chinaman had taken for a rock, arose a pair of enormous claws, each limb of which was as big round as a man's thigh.

"It's a crab! We have run on to the shell of an enormous crab!" shrieked Orde, uselessly firing his gun at the waving claw.

Then all rushed to the stern as the huge nipper hurtled through the air towards them, clashing to, with a fearful hollow sound, within a few inches of the launch's bows.

A second huge claw emerged from the opposite side of the rock, and for several moments the crew of the launch watched, with fear-distended eyes, the frantic efforts the gigantic crab made to seize the strange creature which had alighted on its back as it slept beneath the waves.

Finding itself unable to reach the launch, the struggles of the crab increased tenfold, and it rose higher and higher above the waves until at length the hull of the launch was lifted clean above the water.

Drawing his sword, Captain Flame sprang into the bows, and, leaning forward, slashed at one of the monster's huge rolling eyes.

As his sword bit deep into the yielding mass, he sprang back, just in time to avoid a crushing sweep of those fearful claws.

Finding itself wounded, the crab sank beneath the waves, leaving the launch tossing on the waves like a cork in a mill-stream.

For some minutes no one spoke, no one dared to move.

Each moment they expected the wounded monster to return, and well they knew that one nip of those fearful claws would crush the stout steel launch like a nut.

But evidently the crab had had enough of the fight, for it did not reappear, and, shortly afterwards, the launch resumed her journey.

Half an hour later Captain Flame slowed down his engines within a hundred yards of where the tug, her propeller choked with weeds, steam still issuing from her safety-valve, lay motionless in the heart of the Sargossa Sea.

Save the faint hiss of the escaping steam, not a sound arose from the imprisoned vessel. The moving forms which had crowded her from stem to stern shortly before were gone.

Not a sign of life greeted the adventurers' straining eyes. Yet it was certain that shortly before a fearful tragedy had been enacted on board the tug.

From his place in the launch's stern, Captain Flame hailed the silent ship.

There was no reply.

Again his voice rang loud and clear over the sleeping Sargossa Sea in a strident:

"Ship ahoy!"

Not so much as a whisper answered his hail.

He looked round upon the boys' white faces.

The silence that obtained on board the tug seemed even more horrible than the fearful sight they had witnessed whilst yet some distance from her.

Even Captain Flame hesitated.

None could tell what unspeakable terrors lurked behind the tug's low bulwarks.

With a sudden gesture he motioned the boys to the bows. In obedience to his skilful touch, the launch glided alongside the tug.

Ordering Mopsa to remain in the launch, he led the way on deck.

For a moment the boys hesitated; then with a loud, strident, danger-defying British cheer, followed their fearless leader.

The Mad Stoker.

As, sword in hand, their rifles slung over their shoulders, the three boys sprang on to the deck of the tug, they paused and gazed to right and left, expecting each moment to find some fearful denizen of the mysterious sea, into which they had dared to penetrate, advancing upon them.

But nothing happened.

A stillness as of death obtained over the imprisoned vessel.

Not a sound broke that funereal quiet but the rapidly decreasing hiss of escaping steam.

Captain Flame's stern, calm voice broke the silence.

"Aboard there! Tumble up! Lively, lads! It is a friend who calls!" he cried.

There was no response.

Sheathing their swords, and holding their rifles at the ready, the little party prepared to explore the silent tug.

Will Avery came to an abrupt halt.

"Good heavens, what is that?" he whispered in awed tones, pointing to a fearful object that lay in the scuppers, immediately beneath where a ship's tomahawk was embedded, almost to the haft, in the bulwarks.

It lay in a pool of blood, and looked like nothing so much as a large crab.

Thrusting his toe beneath it, Dick Dauntless turned the repulsive object over.

With cries of horror, the boys drew back.

Before them lay a huge hand, or claw, with five talonlike fingers, each of which terminated in long sharp-pointed nippers, like those on the feet of a crab.

What can best be described as the palm of this fearful claw, was over a foot in width, and the boys felt their cheeks pale as they tried to imagine what kind of a monster could have borne so huge a limb. It had evidently been severed from wrist, or hock, by the last despairing effort of some terror-haunted mariner.

An exclamation of astonishment from Captain Flame recalled them to the fact that their leader was about to descend into the tug's small cabin.

He stood at the head of the companion-way, gazing incredulously at the steamer's funnel, whence black clouds of smoke were pouring.

Changing his mind, Captain Flame turned his steps towards the engine-room hatchway, closely followed by the three boys.

The gratings round the engines were untenanted, but from the stoke-hold came sounds as of someone frantically shovelling coal into the furnace.

Noiselessly the little party of adventurers approached the ladder and looked down.

A strange sight met their eyes.

Shown up in bold relief by the red light from the furnaces, a huge man, well over six feet in height, was throwing coals on the fire with tireless energy.

Stripped to the waist, his perspiring form was black with coaldust. His long hair was as white as driven snow. Yet the man's frame was as upright and well filled out as that of one in the prime of life.

A slight movement of the adventurers attracted the stoker's attention.

With a fierce snarl he turned, and, swinging a heavy iron shovel around his head, glanced upwards.

Even Captain Flame recoiled before the fearful expression in the man's pale, terror-contorted face.

Never had Dick Dauntless deemed it possible that such an expression of horror, fear, and dread could be shown on a human face.

His lips were drawn up in a perpetual grin, the light of madness gleamed from his eyes.

"Keep back, ye misshapen scum of the underworld, or I'll send ye back to Davy Jones with a hole in your head it will take him all his time to heal!"

At a sign from Captain Flame the boys followed him on deck, and the terror-demented stoker resumed his feverish work.

"Let him be. He will best serve our ends where he is," declared the inventor; adding, as he once more approached the companion-way: "Come, let us assure ourselves, before we go further, that yonder poor fellow is indeed the sole survivor."

What they expected to see below decks it is impossible to say; certainly not the utter absence of confusion that they found in every saloon and cabin into which they looked.

Everything was exactly as though the late occupiers of the cabins had expected to return.

On the table of the saloon was the remains of a half-eaten dinner, and in one cabin, evidently that of the captain, a pair of soiled sheets lay where they had been thrown. A clean sheet was tucked neatly round the mattress, and another over the back of a chair.

Everything was in order.

It seemed as though the late users might return at any moment, to resume their ordinary occupations.

There were no signs of confusion, no signs of the terror which had driven the stoker mad, and of which Dick Dauntless had caught so fleeting a vision.

But the absence of all signs of violence increased tenfold the mystery which shrouded the fate of the tug's ill-fated crew. And at last they returned on deck, to find the steam hurtling fiercely through the escape-pipe abaft the funnel.

Amongst Many Horrors.

"Avery and Orde to the launch! Move her round to the stern, and free the propeller from weeds!" ordered Captain Flame.

Saluting, the two boys turned to obey.

Jack Orde was the first to reach the side. An ejaculation of dismay burst from his lips.

"Mopsa is gone!" he declared, aghast at the discovery.

"Gone!" repeated the others, in a breath.

All rushed to the side and looked over.

It was true.

The launch still floated sluggishly on the weed-covered waters, but no sign of the merry little Chinaman was to be seen.

"He slipped on board whilst we were below, and is hiding somewhere," suggested Dick.

Captain Flame shook his head.

"It would be an act of rank disobedience, and for all his love of mischief, I have never known Mopsa neglect his post or play tricks when left in a position of trust," he declared, in a broken voice.

"Then you think he has been seized by one of the fearful creatures with which this fearful sea abounds?" suggested Dick, in low, hushed tones.

"I think nothing," retorted Captain Flame, almost sharply, "only that the sooner we leave this haunted neighbourhood the better. To your places in the launch, lads!"

Without a word Will and Jack slung themselves over the side.

Their hearts were in their mouths, for the mysterious disappearance of Mopsa had filled them with terror, but none who served Captain Flame dared to disobey his orders.

As, with some little difficulty, for the weeds were growing thicker around the tug's hull every minute, they pulled the launch to the stern, Captain Flame looked over the side.

"Put on your helmets, boys. Hand me up Dauntless's and my own. It is as well to be prepared for every eventuality," he ordered.

Without a word the boys obeyed, leaving Mopsa's helmet safe from danger of injury in the bows of the launch.

This done, they attacked the weeds entwined round the propeller with the axes each member of the expedition wore at his belt to balance his sword.

Although the stalks were tough, they were not very thick, and an hour's hard work sufficed to clear away sufficient weeds to allow the screw to cut itself free directly the engines started.

"Deck ahoy!" shouted Will Avery, scrambling to the bows of the launch, and making a speaking-trumpet of his hands. "Screw clear, should we come on board?" he asked, as Dick Dauntless looked over the side.

"I'll ask Captain—" he began. Then Avery saw his face pale behind the glass of his diving helmet, as he added quickly, "Where's Jack?"

Will Avery swung swiftly round.

His hands fell to his sides, and he gazed in speechless bewilderment towards where he had left Orde, half a minute before, chopping away a few straggling pieces of weed from the rudder-post.

"He's gone!" he gasped; adding, in a frightened whisper: "This is awful! He was there a minute before, and now he's been whisked away as though he had vanished into thin air!"

Dick Dauntless waited to hear no more, but, dropping into the launch, was about to throw himself into the weed-covered sea, when a loud "Stop!" from immediately above his head caused him to look up.

Captain Flame was leaning over the tug's side.

"Jack Orde has gone, sir! He's my chum, and I'll find him or die!" cried Dick desperately.

"Find him we will, if he is still alive, but not by throwing our lives away uselessly. We can do nothing as we are, but as soon as we have visited the Morning Star we will return to the Octopus, and recover our lost ones, living or dead, if we have to pull the whole Sargossa Sea up by the roots to do so," announced Captain Flame determinedly.

(To be continued in next Thursday's number of "THE GEM" Library. Will regular readers kindly hand this number containing these thrilling chapters of "Deep Sea Gold" on to their friends?—THE EDITOR.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 190.

NEXT WEEK: "THE SCHOOLBOY EXPLORERS!" A Splendid, New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. and Bully Gore. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

OUR NEW WEEKLY FEATURE —

Next Thursday.**"THE SCHOOLBOY EXPLORERS!"**

The title of next Thursday's tale of Tom Merry & Co. explains itself. The chums of St. Jim's, ever adventurous, start on an exploring expedition, and it is needless to add that their adventures in the wild African forest make reading of the most interesting and thrilling description. You will thoroughly appreciate.

"THE SCHOOLBOY EXPLORERS!"Not a Record!

The letter from K. W. H., of East Ham, which I published on this page in a recent issue, has brought me in over a hundred letters from others of my loyal readers. You will remember that K. W. H. claimed that he had read every number of the GEM yet published. Well, more than a hundred others of my chums can make a similar claim, and many of them add that they have also read every number of the "Magnet" ever published. I confess it was quite a surprise to me—though a most pleasant one—to get such a quantity of such letters. It is only another proof of the unflinching loyalty of my readers, whom I thank from the bottom of my heart.

"East, West, the Gem's Best!"

I continue to receive a large number of enthusiastic letters every day, and it is noticeable that a large proportion of these are from my numerous girl readers. Here is one, for instance, which incidentally shows how it is that the GEM is read in practically every corner of the globe:

"Rock Ferry.

"Dear Editor,—I am writing to let you know what I and my friends think of your lovely books. We think they are glorious, and as I have been reading them every week for nearly four years, I feel as if I know the boys quite well. On my tenth birthday a boy friend gave me a dozen copies, which he had bound himself. When I have finished them I send the copies to a dear friend of mine in Egypt. She said in her last letter: 'The books are lovely. Everyone in the house has read them, including grandpa and grandma. Grandma thinks they are "real jolly," and she often has a laugh over them. When we have finished them they go to a family of seven boys, who all read them and enjoy them.'"

"Now I must close. With best wishes, from your devoted friend,
JANET C."

Many thanks, Janet C.! Your letter is only another proof that the "GEM Library" is always welcomed by young and old wherever it goes.

An Envious Reader.

The chorus in praise of our grand new serial, "Deep Sea Gold," still continues, and here is a reader who is frankly and positively envious of Dick Dauntless and Jack Orde. This is what he says:

"Dear Editor,—You ask the verdict on 'Deep Sea Gold'? I have only read a few chapters, but I think them delightful. There is a spice of new adventure in the story, and I think Dick Dauntless and Jack are very lucky to be chosen by Captain Flame. I wish I was! I have been a reader of the GEM ever since it first came out in a halfpenny number. Eagerly looking forward to next week's number, I remain yours truly,
R. H."

"P.S.—Have got two new readers for the GEM, who both order their copies in advance.
R. H."

Good for you, R. H.! You evidently possess to the full the adventurous spirit which has made Britishers masters of the world. Thanks for introducing the GEM to two non-readers, too. You did me a real service there.

Back Numbers.

In a very nice little note, for which I heartily thank him, Master S. Parry, a loyal reader from Richmond, informs me that he has a few of the halfpenny GEMS which he is willing to let H. E. French have if he cares for them. Master French had better write to Master Parry direct, if he wants to take advantage of the latter's generous offer. Here is Master Parry's full address: "11, Beaumont Avenue, Richmond, Surrey."

Catti Patti.

The excessively good-humoured gentleman in evening clothes and Gibus sat on the bottom step, listening rapturously to strains of what he considered the most beautiful music.

"Wonderful things! these gramophones, ain't they?" he remarked to a passing constable.

"Yes, Mr. Swillhurst, they certainly are," replied the P.-c., who was used to the gentleman's 2 a.m. eccentricities. "But what makes you say so?"

"Why, jusht you lishten, conshtable—jusht you lishten! Don't you hear that lovely gramophone nexst door? It must be a record of Patti shinging 'Home, Sweet Home,' conshtable, isn't it?"

"Patti singin' 'Ome, Sweet 'Ome,' on the gramophone. Mr. Swillhurst!" exclaimed the constable, lifting the gentleman up by his coat-collar. "Not it! You've bin a-sittin' on the cat!"

School Inspector: "And now, what can you tell me of the Spanish Armada?"

Tommy (the learned): "Please, sir, Sir Francis Drake was having a game of marbles on the village green, when he suddenly saw the Armada advancing through his microscope."

Useful Hints for Photographers.

Always keep your dark-room in perfect order, and as clean as possible. When the hypo. gets spilt on the floor, wipe it up at once. If it is allowed to dry, it will rise up in fine dust, and cause pinholes in your negatives.

Work with as little ruby light as possible, and you will obtain the best results.

If a plate is dipped into perfectly clean water just before development, the developer will flow more evenly over it.

Used different shaped bottles for your hypo. and developer. By adopting this method you will not be liable to get them mixed in the semi-darkness of the dark-room.

If at any time while you are developing a plate you wish to leave the dark-room for a minute or so, you can prevent any light getting to the negative in the process of development by placing a larger tray over that in which the plate is lying.

After a certain amount of wear the leatherette on any hand camera is liable to look dull and brown. The following recipe for reblacking leatherette has been tried with considerable success. Mix one ounce of carnauba wax, two ounces of beeswax, and three and a half ounces of vaseline together in a saucepan, and while melting stir in half a scruple (ten grains) of oil-black, or any aniline dye, soluble in oil or varnish; or else use sufficient lampblack, which can be obtained from any oilshop, to make the mixture black in colour. Stir the composition well, and with a rag rub it thoroughly over the body of the camera to be refurbished. Then, with a stiff brush, brush the leatherette covering of the camera vigorously until all the superfluous polish is removed. The covering will then look bright and glossy, and be as good as new.

THE EDITOR.